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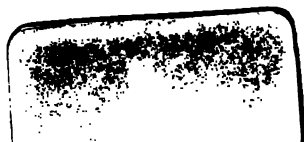
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CHUMS:

A TALE FOR THE YOUNGSTERS.

BY

HARLEIGH SEVERNE,

AUTHOR OF "LITTLE HARRY GWYNNE," ETC., ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY HARRY FURNISS.



GRIFFITH AND FARRAN,

SUCCESSORS TO NEWBERRY AND HARRIS,

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TO ANY LITTLE SCAMP
WHO MAY SEE HIMSELF REFLECTED IN THE
FOLLOWING PAGES,—

THOUGH NOTABLY TO HIS SMALL NEPHEW,

Walter,—

THIS STORY OF CHILDHOOD'S DAYS

IS DEDICATED BY

THE AUTHOR.



"THE UNFORTUNATE BOY CAME TUMBLING HEAD FOREMOST."

CORN.

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CHUMS.

CHAPTER I.

EAVESDROPPERS.

"My eye, Harry! there's *ſich* a *leetle* new fellow come. If you come here, and squinny through the crack of the door, you'll *jest* be able to see him."

I pricked up my ears at once. Evidently there were others interested in my entrance into school-life besides the two ladies seated at the far end of the room, who were so vigorously plying my ex-nurse Susan with all manner of questions as to my welfare, past, present, and future.

Evidently, too, as well from the hushed tone of voice as from his suggested mode of beholding the new-comer, the speaker was desirous of concealing the presence of himself and his companion from the knowledge of those within.

Having grown tired of my attempt to follow the conversation going on across yonder, little of which I either understood or cared for, I had retired into the background, with a view of discovering something with which to amuse myself during the uninteresting proceedings.

As I looked round, I caught sight of the piano, which at once became an object of irresistible attraction.

But the scamper of feet along the hall, and the sudden

cessation of the sound just outside the door, diverted my attention into another channel in time to overhear the remark on my personal appearance, and the stifled giggling which followed it.

Oh dear ! how my heart sank ! And yet not so much from the words as from the crushing emphasis with which the monosyllable "sich" was uttered. For in his desire to be justly impressive, the speaker expressed his ideas in a series of mispronunciations.

The tone of his voice, and the prolonged pauses on certain words, gave me such a gloomy and despairing idea of my appearance that I almost began to cry.

I was not more than six or seven years old, when, owing to domestic troubles, my father arranged to send me to a neighbouring boarding-school. My mother was dead, and my faithful old nurse—at least she seemed old to me in those days—was going to be married.

My little bit of life so far had been very peaceful, though somewhat uneventful ; no brothers, no sisters, no companions, except my dear old Susan in the day-time, and my father for a short happy hour in the evenings. How I loved those pleasant times when I sat by his side in my high chair at the tea-table, and confided to him all my joys and sorrows of the day-time !

With a relish undiminished by a previous consumption in the nursery, I plodded away at my bread and butter and jam, or drank my milk, and thought myself a little man because it was faintly coloured with tea, and flavoured with a lump of sugar, just like Father's. And even if the quantity of tea was much less in mine than in his, it was made all fair and square ; for had I not much the largest piece of sugar ?

Sometimes I overheard Father and Susan talking earnestly together about her going away ; and every now and then came the words "Aunt Mary," and "Mother," and "Never !"

But I was too young to understand what they said ; only once the look on Father's face, when they were so engrossed as to forget my presence, startled me so much that I burst into a storm of sobs, for which I could give no reason except that I was frightened, and felt lonely and neglected when they took no notice of me. Father's face changed at once, and catching me up in his arms, he said hurriedly to Susan,—

“The little fellow begins to take in more than we imagine ; we must not forget ourselves again.”

After that, they never spoke of “Aunt Mary,” before me.

When the day came for me to leave home, and my boxes were packed, and all ready to put on the cab, it was only the parting with Father that seemed so dreadfully hard and miserable.

For it was nice to think that I should have a lot of little boys to play with, particularly when I had in my possession a box full of beautiful new books, and toys of all kinds. And then Susan was going with me ; and though she would come away again at once, yet, in my childish fancy, even a few hours were too far ahead to look forward to so grievous a parting.

First of all, there was the railway journey to enjoy ; against any drawbacks to which I was well provided, by an ample supply of sandwiches and Banbury cakes. Had I formed then any idea of how long a half-year really was, or guessed how many, many times I should yearn to see my father's face again, and to sit and talk to him as of yore, I think my child's heart would have broken with its weight of woe. But a merciful Father in Heaven, guiding all things rightly, hides the light from our eyes until we are strong enough to bear it, and gives not to a child to know the mysteries of life, until his increasing years shall enable him to bear its burden.

Though the delights and trials of childhood may be as great and as deep as those of later years—sometimes I think they are more so—yet it is because they pass away so quickly, that

they are so entirely different from the lasting joys and troubles of after-life.

Therefore, though I cried, and clung round my father's neck, beseeching him, with choking sobs, not to send me away from him, and declaring wildly that I should die of grief, yet by the time the train was fairly on its way, I was seated in a corner of the carriage, plying Susan with questions faster than she could answer them—which fact did *not* tend to decrease my inquiring interest in the country through which we passed.

But my flow of language dried up suddenly, when, having left the train and driven for some way through narrow country lanes, we pulled up at the stone-pillared porch of a large house, standing some way back from the road. Scarcely had the bell ceased ringing, when, through the wide open door, I saw, coming hastily towards us, a nice motherly-looking old lady in a white cap, wearing a light shawl loosely thrown over her shoulders. Susan was superintending the getting down of my wonderful little play-box, whilst I stood helplessly looking on, thinking ruefully of all the scenes through which I should have to pass, and of which this meeting with the old lady was the first, and perhaps the least disagreeable.

"So this is my new little boy, is it?" she said, before she quite reached me. Then, stooping down, she kissed me kindly on both cheeks. As she rose, she held out her hand to Susan, saying, "And I think he will be my smallest, too."

"'Little and good,' you know, dear," turning to me again. "Is that to be it?"

Then, taking me by the hand, she led the way into the drawing-room.

Before we had been there two minutes, in came a tall, black-haired young lady, with fresh-coloured cheeks, and dark, merry eyes. Almost before I noticed her entrance, she pounced quickly upon me, picked me up by my arms, and holding me to the level of her face, kissed me warmly, exclaiming,—

"Well, you *are* a nice little manikin! I know I shall like *you*, and you will have to love *me* very much? will you promise?"

After giving me a playful shake, she set me on my feet once more, leaving me too scared to make any reply.

"There, child, you have frightened the poor little fellow out of his wits!" said Mrs. Royce, reprovingly; but with a smile which plainly showed that her daughter seldom, or never, fell under the ban of her serious displeasure.

"Just come and talk to his nurse, my dear; she has not long to stay here."

So it came about, as already related, that, left for a time to my own devices, I had wandered over to that part of the room where stood the piano. Oh, how fond I was of music! All the more so, perhaps, because it was so rare an occurrence for any one to play on our great "grand" at home, that the novelty added zest to the enjoyment. Accordingly I was on the point of raising the lid, just far enough to slip my fingers underneath and stealthily touch the keys, when the incident occurred which opens this chapter.

I felt very uncomfortable at being frustrated in my designs, with the knowledge of the four bright eyes scanning me, and the sound of low voices making free and easy observations upon the occupants of the room. As detection appeared improbable, the spirits of the two boys rose to a more boisterous level. Presently, with an audible titter, the more daring of the two gave his companion a sudden and unexpected push.

Being at that moment engaged in peering through the crevice of the door, he was totally unprepared to receive such a shock. The result was, that, with a loud crash, the door flew wide open, and the unfortunate boy came tumbling headforemost into the room, almost at my very feet.

Finding that his joke had gone further than was intended, his companion turned tail, and fled away as fast as his legs

would carry him. Before, however, his deserted partner in guilt could rise from his knees, he was seized, and held in custody by the dark-haired young lady who had endeavoured to make friends with me.

It was my turn to laugh at *him* now, for the poor little fellow presented a most ludicrous appearance on being led ignominiously forward to make his bow to company. Terrified at his position, and half inclined to cry, he still seemed on the verge of going off into a fit of laughter; a combination which gave to his freckled face and merry blue eyes an expression difficult to describe, but exceedingly absurd to behold.

"Here is one of the culprits, Mother," said Miss Royce, loosening her grasp on his coat collar, and running her hand through the masses of brown hair growing in a profusion of short curls upon her captive's head. "What is to be done with him?"

"I will leave him entirely to your tender mercy, my dear," replied Mrs. Royce, smiling. Then, turning again to Susan, she proceeded with her inquiries about me and mine.

"Oh! please miss, I couldn't help it—indeed I couldn't: Johnnie Harris pushed me;" and the little boy lifted to his teacher's face two eyes dim with half-formed tears. But the words were accompanied by a peculiar twitching in the corners of the lips, and a look of amusement through the tear-dimmed eyes, which seemed to say, "I know you too well to be afraid of you. You're laughing at me all the time, I believe, only you won't show it."

"Well, I will let you off this once. But, mind, if you are caught eaves dropping again—" and Miss Royce allowed a suggestive silence to supply the remainder of the sentence; and then continued, "You are the very boy I wanted. Here is such a nice little fellow come to school, and I want you and him to be ever such good friends, for you will be the two youngest and smallest, you know. Though I scarcely know which *is* the shorter of you two."

"Oh, *he* is—much!" put in my new friend, in a tone of injured dignity, quite forgetting his recent discomfiture in his anxiety to prove his assertion. "Just see," he added, placing his back against mine, and feeling the respective levels of our heads, "why, I am nearly half a head taller than he is."

"Yes, you certainly are taller. You won't be the 'little one' any longer, now."

"All the better!" stoutly replied the boy; adding naively, as though it were a sudden afterthought, "only you'll let me carry the clothes upstairs on Saturday nights still, won't you?"

"We shall see. But now take your little friend round, and give him a swing, before the others are out of school. Mind you are kind, and don't swing him any higher than he wishes."

For a moment I thought I would not leave Susan, to go away with a stranger; but he put out his hand so reassuringly, and said in so kind and winning a tone, "Come along with me, then," that my scruples vanished, and away I went.

When we were alone, the restraint of shyness soon wore off, and before long we were talking as volubly as seven-year-old children generally do.

"I say, though, what's your name?" inquired my patron suddenly, stopping, and looking me fully in the face with an air of great impressiveness, "'cause, you know, one ought to know who one is talking to."

"Bernard Ayres," I replied, "and yours is Harry something-or-other, isn't it?"

"Yes, Harry Morland. But every one calls me 'Harry;' because, you know, there isn't any other. Now there are two or three 'Johnnies;' there's Johnnie Harris—he's the one that nearly got me into a row just now—and Johnnie Freeman, and Smedley too. Then there's Sam Camp—we all call him 'the Scamp' 'cause that is his name, don't you see? And, oh my!

he is a onner, too. He and I have no end of fun on 'tub-nights.' You heard me asking Miss Royce about it, didn't you? We're all 'tubbed' in the kitchen on Saturdays, and then the youngest, and one of the first-class chaps, always carry the clothes up into the bedrooms, and run up to fetch the dressing-gowns down, after each fellow has used it to go upstairs in. When it is the Scamp's turn, we *do* have fine sprees along those lobbies, I can tell you!"

So he rattled on, whilst I listened, and tried hard to take in the substance of his meaning, but with only partial success. Wondering as to what sort of person S. Camp the 'onner' must be, I sat myself in the swing, and soon forgot everything in the pleasure of the passing moments.

Distant shouts, however, proclaimed the approach of a number of noisy-voiced boys, and just as my companion called out, "Hullo! the fellows are out of school!" the leader of the rush appeared round the corner, almost running against the swing in his anxiety to be the first to reach it.

Evidently he was not expecting to find it already occupied, and for one moment he stood irresolute, with his hand upon the rope. By this time, the other boys, quieted for the moment by the sight of a stranger, had gathered round in silence.

"It's the new boy!" said a boy in a loud whisper to his neighbour.

"Is it?" replied the other. "What a little mite of a fellow he is!"

"How on earth did *you* get here, Harry?" asked Willie Knowles, who stood with his back against the wall, tilting his hat over his eyes to shade them from the noonday glare of the sun.

"Why, Miss Royce sent me out to give Bernard Ayres a swing," replied my friend, proud to be able to inform his audience that he alone was possessed of the knowledge of my name.

"Well, whoever he is, he'll have to turn out of it now, for I 'bagged' the swing before any one else this morning, and I mean to have it too. So out you go, young 'un!"

Saying which, the boy who had seized the rope caught hold of the seat, and with one quick turn of his hand sent me sprawling out upon the ground.

It was not far to fall. So low, indeed, was the seat fixed, that the usurper had to bend almost double in order to readjust it.

Doubtless the rude shock to my feelings, more than the actual physical hurt, would have resulted in an overflow of tears, had not the strange proceedings of Harry Morland diverted my attention as I rose slowly from the ground.

With his freckled face aglow, and his tongue between his teeth, he rushed upon the unsuspecting object of his wrath, and with a "Take that, you great bully, Rogers! and that!—and that!" he brought his doubled-up fist down three times upon the other's back, with a vehemence which showed how much in earnest he really was.

Rogers raised himself with an angry exclamation, and started off in pursuit of the attacking party. But, fearful of losing his swing after all, he pulled up before he had gone many feet, contenting himself by bawling savagely across the yard,—

"By Jove! young 'un, I *will* give you a tanning for that, by-and-by!"





CHAPTER II.

FORKS—OR FEELINGS?

SOME of the boys had cried, "Shame!" at Rogers' unkind conduct, whilst others had applauded my avenger with sundry cries of, "Well done, Harry boy!"—"Bravo, youngster!" and a chuckling laugh of approval; but all in a covert, half-hearted way, as though the incident had led them into an expression of opinion, which, though universally shared, was seldom openly pronounced.

Harry, having so publicly proclaimed himself my champion, now returned to my side, and calling to Johnnie Harris to join us, led me away for further explorations.

"That fellow Rogers is a horrid bully. No one likes him, do they, Jack?"

"I should say not—I *hate* him!" returned Johnnie Harris, warmly.

"Swinging is all the rage just now," continued Harry, explanatorily. "There always are 'rages' for certain things, at different times, in every school, you know,—oh, no! you don't though, 'cause you've never been to school before, you said: and then if one chap says, 'I bag' something, before any one else, he has to have it the first, do you see?"

"And the one who says, 'I bag second,' gets the next turn," chimed in Jack, who evidently understood and followed up the train of thought suggested by, rather than expressed in, Harry's

words, very much more easily than I did. "But never you mind what Bully Rogers says to you—only don't let him knock you about *too* much. If you pretend not to care, he'll soon give over."

"He didn't hurt you?" interrupted Harry, though the inquiry came rather late.

"N—o—o. Not—much," I answered slowly, trying to speak cheerfully. But at the prospect of a renewal of such treatment in the future, a rising sensation in my throat caught my voice, and rendered it very shaky, in spite of all my attempts to steady it.

"Bless you! Harry, he is such a little chap,—anything's enough to hurt him!" responded Johnnie Harris, in a tone of dignified compassion.

"But I shall grow out of that by-and-by, shan't I?" I asked innocently, but with some anxiety about my personal appearance.

"Oh, yes,—by-and-by!" laughed Johnnie.

Just then a brilliant idea on the part of little Morland put fresh thoughts into all our heads.

"Come and see the white mice," he said.

I was conducted by my two guides to an outbuilding, out of sight, but within sound of the boys at the swing. Here all the live stock belonging to any of the pupils were provided with comfortable quarters.

To reach the door, you had to pass through a little open space, enclosed by a thick laurel hedge. This was used for the animals' exercising-ground; and here, eagerly watching the movements of a large white rabbit, we discovered a little fellow named Mat Davis.

"I can't think what ever is the matter with old Silky; she doesn't care a bit for these carrot-tops. I believe the Scamp must have done something to her, when he fed her this morning," said her young master, rising from his squatting

attitude, and looking at Harry with a puzzled expression on his face.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed, as he suddenly became aware of my presence, "who—"

Here he stopped abruptly, and stooping down hastily, caught poor bunny up by her long lop ears, and began to caress her affectionately. He was a gentle, shy boy, who was easily put out of countenance by the presence of a stranger, even though he were of such modest pretensions as myself.

"This is the new boy—Bernard Ayres," explained Harry, evidently considering the duty of introduction his by acquired right.

"We are going to show him the white mice and guinea-pigs and things," added Johnnie Harris, anxious to share in doing the honours of the place to the new boy.

So the cage was brought out, and placed upon a convenient bench.

Just at first, never having seen any previously, I was horrified at the way in which the two boys handled their pets.

However, that feeling soon wore off, and I begged to be allowed to hold one of them in my hand. But the mouse was restless, and slipped out of my hand, in spite of the desperate squeezing by which I tried to detain it in my grasp. The next moment I felt it crawling up my sleeve, and, with a terrified cry, wildly attempted to shake it off my arm.

Fortunately Mat Davis saw the danger, and ran to the rescue, laughing kindly at my unnecessary fears, whilst he gently removed the cause of them back into its cage again.

It was wonderful to see how tame and docile the mice were. They allowed their young masters to put them through every kind of exercise, without either attempting to escape, or expressing any objection to the performance, by the use of their sharp little claws or teeth.

They ran up and down a sloping board, passing and repass-

ing on the proper sides ; they wore small impromptu horse-collars, made from laurel-leaves ; they squeezed through tiny circles formed by the boys' fingers ; they even drew little cardboard waggons, loaded with pieces of bunny's turnips, chopped into the shape of potatoes, and covered with carrot-tops, representing cabbages, in imitation of a market-gardener's cart. These were sent from one to another to be unloaded, or reladen with a fresh stock of commodities, again and again, until at length the toy-horses began to show signs of fatigue. The programme was evidently more monotonous to them than to their owners, and, once or twice, the more rebellious did their best to escape into the laurels by the aid of a neighbouring bough.

By-and-by they were permitted, after a short run on the ground, to return to their comfortable dwellings. Then, having been supplied with a nut apiece for dessert, and their cotton-wool beds having been carefully shaken, they were left to enjoy their well-earned repose in undisturbed peace.

The next place we visited was the pigeon-house ; but as this was fixed high up against the house, we had to content ourselves with merely watching, without handling. Some young birds were just being fed—"squeakers," Harry said they were called. Most curious it was to see the father take his young ones' bills in his, and force the soft food from his breast down their hungry throats. For until the mother, flying up, drew off the attention of one of them, both the young pair, in their anxiety to be fed, had forced their rosy bills into his, and then such a struggle ensued, that amongst the excitement of the fluttering, and pumping, and wing-flapping, we expected every moment to see one or other of the three fall over.

Our attention was drawn off by an exclamation from Johnnie Harris. Looking up, we noticed, away in the distance, a little flock of pigeons, wheeling swiftly round and round, but flying in our direction.

"It's the tumblers coming home; just you watch them, young 'un!" said Mat, putting his arm round my neck, and pointing upwards to the birds. Ever since he had taken the mouse off my arm, we had been gradually warming into a state of firm friendship.

It was curious to notice what a fashion the boys had, from Willie Knowles, the eldest, downwards, of calling each other "youngster," or "young 'un;" even Mat Davis and Harry Morland, neither of whom were much older than I, very frequently used one or other of those expressions to me, with a lofty air of patronage.

Sure enough, as we stood watching the pigeons, two of the birds suddenly dropped, in a series of somersets, to a distance of many feet in a straight line. Then off they flew again, as though nothing had happened, to repeat the same performance as the fancy took them.

"Don't they turn head over heels splendidly? I wish I were a pigeon; it must be such jolly fun!" remarked Harry, his hands in his pockets, and his head thrown so far back that his Scotch cap fell off, and lay at his heels.

"Sam—("That's the Scamp, you know," interrupted Harry, addressing me.)—"Sam says that they get suddenly giddy, and can't help tumbling; but I don't believe that, for they always look as though they enjoyed themselves tremendously, and keep on as though they thought it the best lark out," said Mat, pensively.

"The best 'pigeon' you mean,—not 'lark,'" cried Harry, laughing so heartily at his own very poor witticism, that we all joined in from sympathy.

Just then a bell rang out a loud peal.

"Oh my! it's dinner-time. Come along, kids!" exclaimed Johnnie Harris.

So the bright blue sky, the fleecy clouds, and the black specks floating about in it must be exchanged for the blue-

papered walls, white tablecloth, and savoury odours of the dining-room.

There was the sound of a sudden rush, now, along the path towards the house.

Above it rose a shrill whistle, and clearing the ranks on either side, scuffling his feet, and working his arms like the connecting-rods of an engine, ran a boy, whose fat face and hatless head were crowned by a tangled mass of carrot hair.

He passed us, uttering a succession of puffing, blowing noises, and with a speed which took him out of sight almost directly.

"Sh—sh—sh—sh! Whistle—whistle!" came back to us across the air.

"There goes the Scamp; isn't he a rum 'un?" said Harry. "He's pretending to be an express train, don't you see?"

Miss Royce met us at the hall-door.

"Well, Harry," said she, "what have you been doing with your new friend? Have you been very kind to him, and shown him all that there is to be seen?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Royce, the rabbits, and the white mice, and the pigeons, and everything."

"That's right. And did you have a nice swing?" she inquired, taking my hand.

"Yes, thank you," I replied. Then, in a very subdued voice, I added, "Please may I go to Susan now?"

I was naturally a very shy child, and now that there was nothing interesting to divert my attention from my own sorrows, a feeling of great loneliness came over me.

"Oh, you must have your hands washed, and your hair brushed, ready for dinner," answered Miss Royce, turning the subject. "Are not you dreadfully hungry after so long a journey? Come with me, and we'll soon have those dirty little puds as clean as ever again. What have you been doing to get them in such a mess, eh?"

Receiving no answer, she stopped, and bending down, looked into my face.

"Oh, come, this will never do : you must be a little man, and not cry. You will be as happy as a king here, in a very short time."

"I want to go to Susan!" was the only reply I could gasp out between my sobs.

Just then we met Mrs. Royce, and a hurried whispering took place between mother and daughter.

"He will never understand her motive," I heard the old lady say, as she passed on.

"I'll try to make him," replied Miss Royce. Turning to me again, she sat down on the stairs, and, drawing me to her, placed an arm affectionately round my waist.

"Bernie, dear, Susan had to go away while you were out with Harry. She saw you through the window once, and thought you looked so happy, that she hadn't the heart to upset you by saying 'good-bye.' Poor Susan! she was so sorry to slip away like that, but she left ever so much love, and such a lot of kisses for you.

Upon this, I set up a perfect howl of misery, refusing to be comforted for a long time.

"Oh fie! If you cry like that, I shall not like to give you Susan's kisses. You must dry those eyes like a good boy; what would Susan say if she saw you now? Shall I catch the tears in a glass bottle. and send them to her, eh?"

I smiled faintly. A good sign, I suppose she thought, for, lifting up my head, she smothered me with kisses, which so tickled my neck and throat that in spite of myself I was forced to laugh, shyly, whilst I mopped the tears from my eyes, and nose, and cheeks.

"You must be quick and learn to write to Susan," she continued, presently; "and then that will be almost as good as talking, won't it? She has given me the keys of your boxes,

so, after dinner, you must help me unpack them. We must put the cakes, and all the 'goodies'—as the boys call them—away in the cupboard. Then we must find you a desk for the books and papers, and make room in the hall for your play-box."

Thus she led me carefully away from the subject that was weighing my spirits down so heavily.

The second bell rang for dinner. My eyes were red and swollen as I took my seat on the long, hard form, but the pangs of hunger were sufficiently acute to subdue, for the moment, any painful sensations of the heart.

Once alleviated, however, my mental troubles regained the ascendancy, and laying down my knife and fork, I recommenced crying quietly to myself.

"Oh! how could Susan have been so cruel as to go away without saying 'good-bye'?" I thought. And looking back upon her conduct from the distance of long years, I find my opinion unaltered from this outcry of my young, wounded heart. That it sprang from a genuine belief in its true, unselfish kindness, I do not doubt; but that it was a mistaken policy, and a heart-breaking one, my own memory will ever testify.

Though no talking was allowed at meal-times, the boys were far too much occupied to notice me, until Mrs. Royce's sudden exclamation caused all eyes to turn in my direction.

"My dear Jenny, do look at Bernard Ayres! He has cut himself, or run the fork into his finger! He is much too young to use anything but a spoon at present, I can see."

Miss Royce jumped up hurriedly, much alarmed. However, she was at once reassured on finding that my wounds were not physical, and, taking me on her knee, did her best to comfort and amuse me, during the remainder of dinner.

The rest of the day was spent in a fluctuating condition of content and despair. My boxes, especially the play-box,

proved a fruitful source of amusement and interest during much of the afternoon. But the contents of the hamper called forth the strongest expressions of delighted astonishment and approval from Harry Morland, whom I had begged to be allowed to assist in the unpacking and stowing-away processes.

As he turned away from the cupboard, after successfully lodging in its place on the shelf a cake of such large circumference that his hands would barely meet round it, he said to me, in a voice carefully lowered,—

“Rogers thought we were sneaking of him, when *she* (jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards Miss Royce) was asking you about the swing. He was passing just then, and he says he’s going to give *me* a tremendous licking, and that he’ll tan *you* too, if you *have* told. But he won’t, though; for I’ll tell him about your goodies, and you just see,—he’ll be awfully sweet on you—till they’re all gone!—or my name’s not Harry Morland!”





CHAPTER III.

"TRIPPING" AND "POPPING."

BEDTIME came at last.

The whole school, as usual, assembled in the class-room for evening prayers.

As soon as the chapter was ended, we sung a hymn, Miss Royce leading the voices. I was allowed to stand by her at the piano, and tried my very best to join in. But my efforts were only partially successful, for, besides the disregard to time and tune usually observed by little children, I was profoundly ignorant of the words; for I was only sufficiently advanced to read, slowly, short sentences of simple construction.

Oh, how I loved music! In spite of its tendency to increase melancholy, if one be sad and home-sick, it always has been, and ever will be, one of the chiefest sources of my most intense and keenest delights.

Perhaps this sensation increased my disconsolateness, for, as I knelt by my bedside that night, a flood of yearning thoughts surged through my mind, totally sweeping away all recollection of the short child's-prayer that I had been taught to repeat before going to sleep. How I longed to feel Father's arms steal round me, and the rough mustache tickling my face, as he bestowed

upon me the customary nightly kiss, and tucked me tight up in bed, before he took away my candle.

Here I was wretched, miserable ; how was I to *live*, away from Father, and Susan ?

There was a strict rule that not one of the boys should utter a sound, or commence undressing, until all had risen from their knees, one of the governesses being always present to see that such a law was implicitly obeyed.

There was dead silence throughout the room. All stood waiting for the sign to commence operations ; some of the more daring stealthily unbuttoning their jackets and waistcoats, so as to be winners in the race for "first in bed."

At last a sob broke the stillness, and immediately all heads were turned towards me. Burying my face in my arms, I burst forth into an uncontrollable passion of weeping.

"I'm so unhappy. I want to go home. Oh, *please* let me go home," I gasped between my sobs, as Miss Royce lifted me gently on to her lap, and tried to soothe my agitation.

I must have tried her patience sorely, but she was wonderfully kind, and after a while her efforts to calm my ruffled spirits were crowned with success. Even the wildest storms must expend their fury, and at last I recovered myself enough to crawl quietly into bed by the side of Harry Morland, an arrangement which afforded a large amount of satisfaction to each of the parties concerned.

But ah ! it is a gloomy, heartaching proceeding to lay your head upon a strange pillow for the first time at school ; and the memory of that dull suffering, gnawing at the very roots of your heart, as you lie awake, thinking of the loved ones far away, rises before me as I write, making me wonder whether any after-pain is worse than that childish misery which feels so acutely the present aching void, but cannot be comforted by the thought of any future ease or happiness.

So, with arms twined in arms, the tear-drops still wet upon my lashes, and the tear-stains fresh upon my cheeks, I sank into a heavy, troubled slumber.

* * * * *

Two months passed, and my violent grief had long since changed into complete satisfaction with my altered circumstances. Of course, at times, I felt low-spirited, and yearned, with a bitter yearning, for the old days of home life, now so irretrievably departed; but in the main, my life was as happy as the days were long. For there must be ups and downs in our existence, and the level sward, or the run down hill, comes all the more gratefully after a stiff piece of weary plodding up the steep hill side.

"I say, Bernie," said Harry Morland to me one night, "did you ever see a pantomime?"

He and I were alone. Every one else was out in the garden for the half-hour before tea-time. The evening was so enticingly fine, and the garden walks so cool and pleasant, after the fiery heat of a September day, that even the teachers had all strolled out to enjoy the scent of the flowers, and the balmy softness of the air.

Having been unwell, I was forced to stop indoors; so Harry had volunteered to keep me company.

The fine, large hall made a splendid play place, and, with the inner porch doors closed, was as cosy as any room need be. Sitting down on a low seat in the window, Harry explained to me, in his peculiar, juvenile manner, the meaning of his question, for I had confessed to a complete ignorance of the subject.

"You see, Father always takes Phil and Emmy, every Christmas, and he promised to let me go too, as soon as I turned seven. Well, last winter I begged hard to be taken, because my birthday was in March, and then I should have had to wait three-quarters of a year, don't you see?"

"Oh my! it *was* jolly fun! And then, in the middle, all

the flowers, and animals, and things, turned into beautiful fairies. They called it the 'transmigration scene,' I believe. Then the fairies danced away like—like—like this !”

He jumped up, and commenced a wild jig as an illustration, picking up his frock and holding it innocently out at arms-length, to lend additional truth to his picture. His example fired me at once with a strong desire to emulate his achievements, and in another minute, we were both curvetting about the floor in grand style—bowing, scraping, leaping, balancing, spinning round, first on one foot and then on the other, laughing, and kissing our hands to each other ; while, with the disengaged one, we every now and then raised our dresses, and held them forth shoulder high, in a manner which we considered extremely graceful and elegant.¹

Whilst our excitement was at its height, and we were enjoying ourselves to our hearts' content, the door suddenly opened with a sharp creak, and Rogers stood before us. In one moment all was changed. Our spirits sank within us as we turned and saw who had caused the interruption.

He did not move to come forward, nor did he stay longer than just to say, slowly and deliberately,—

“I've owed you two youngsters a grudge ever since the day when you first came, you young jackanapes, Ayres. So I'll just let Mrs. Royce know how you are amusing yourselves behind her back ;—you who set up for such a little saint, too !” and turning a spiteful glance on poor frightened me, he passed out.

A blank despair seized us,—we were so young and small.

¹ For the benefit of my young readers, I should state that, at the time of which I write, frocks were worn by little boys to a much greater age than they are nowadays. On this particular day, Harry and I were going through the disagreeable process of “wearing out” certain dresses ; for both of us were promoted to knickerbockers on Sundays, whilst Harry generally wore them on weekdays as well.

Sitting down in opposite corners of the window seat, we sat wistfully staring into each other's scared faces.

Silently, with no word passing, either to express our innocence, or to lay plans for proving it before our judge, we waited for our doom.

We had been guilty of no intentional misdemeanour.

In perfect innocence had we been amusing ourselves, after the spontaneous impulses of our childish hearts.

Yet we knew, with a sickening foreboding of coming ill, that we were "in" for a punishment,—undeserved, indeed; but from which we no more thought of attempting to escape, than does its fascinated victim from the cruel, piercing glare of the boa-constrictor.

The door opened, and down went our two hearts below zero.

"Harry Morland!" said the voice of Mrs. Royce, in its sternest accents.

Turning a scared look upon me, Harry rose, and crossed the hall in obedience to her summons.

"You follow us, Bernard Ayres," she added, as I sat trembling in my seat, uncertain what course I was expected to pursue.

A quick tap at the window which I had just quitted, made me turn as I reached the corner of the next hall, and looking round, I caught sight of two faces peering in. I recognized them at once,—Rogers and Sam Camp.

How I hated that Rogers, with the broad grin of pleased triumph on his face!

The other I did not mind. Every one knew that the good-natured, mischief-loving Scamp was sure to turn up as spectator of, if he could not be a participator in, *any* excitement that was going on.

At length our melancholy procession halted at the foot of the great staircase.

In what exaggerated form Rogers must have placed our conduct before Mrs. Royce, I can only guess. The impression produced upon her mind was evidently one so far from the truth, that it seems to me surprising, even now, that the exceeding improbability of his story should have deceived her as to its genuineness.

We received a long lecture upon the hardened state of our hearts, and the extraordinary precocity which they evinced in the ways of wickedness. Harry was severely reprimanded for the bad example he had set to me, his junior, and warned as to the responsibility of leading others astray.

I, in turn, escaped with a caution upon the subject of being too easily led by those whose influence tended to draw me into paths of vice.

Then followed the pith of the whole matter.

Seated upon the bottom step, the good lady placed my unfortunate companion across her knees, and inflicted upon him a severe dose of the chastisement familiarly known throughout the school as "popping."

In consideration of this being my first offence, I escaped a similar fate myself. In order, however, that I might become duly impressed with a righteous desire to flee any occasion for a like punishment in the future, I was obliged to stand by and witness the proceedings.

Harry commenced crying, almost as soon as he felt the first rude shock of the chastising hand, and before the operation was fully completed, he was fairly howling.

When it was all over, and we were alone again, I did my best to comfort him. It never entered into our heads that we were martyrs on a small scale, smarting under the sense of an unjust charge.

It never occurred to us to be indignant with Mrs. Royce.

No. We only knew that our hatred of Bully Rogers had deepened fourfold, and that whereas we had intended to enjoy

the quiet time by ourselves, and to be so happy and merry, now we were dejected and spiritless.

A happy thought struck me.

Through the open kitchen door, I espied the cook, cutting great platesful of bread and butter for our tea.

Stealing up to the tall, bony servant, my eyes still dim with recent tears, resting my chin upon the high table, and wistfully eyeing the heaped-up plates, I began, tremblingly,—

"Oh, Anne, *do* give me some of that bread and butter for Harry, please."

"Why, what's up now? You've been crying!"

Of course such a speech as that nearly set me off again, but I restrained myself by a violent effort, and explained,—

"Rogers went and told Mrs. Royce about us; because we were dancing about in the hall, and holding up our dresses."

"Did he? I'd teach him to go telling a pack of lies about me, if he tried it on,—that I would!" interrupted Anne, flourishing her knife emphatically; for Rogers was scarcely more popular with the servants than with his fellow-pupils.

"Yes. And then Mrs. Royce came in, and gave him *such* a 'popping.'"

"Gave who?" inquired Anne, with the usual disregard to grammar.

"Why, Harry, of course. Didn't you hear him crying? He's blubbing out there now, and I can't stop him, and oh! *do* give me a bit for him, *please*."

"Here you are, then. Run off, and mind you don't get caught."

Anne held out a hunch of bread, thickly buttered; so thickly, in fact, that no one but a schoolboy, or an Esquimaux, would have properly appreciated the delicacy.

However, it was just the very thing for me, and I bore it triumphantly away, to try its soothing effect upon my patient.

Seated on the ground, by the door, his back resting in an

angle of the wall, I plied him with mouthful after mouthful of my valuable remedy. By-and-by he was reduced by my exertions to such a pitch that it was simply impossible for him to expend his breath upon anything but his consuming powers.

Backwards and forwards, from table to door, I ran three times, my care being rewarded by a gradual return of serenity to his storm-stained countenance.

"I wish I could get some more cake for you, but my goodies are all gone, and Anne can't spare me any more than this little bit," I said, placing the last morsel between his lips.

"It wouldn't have happened, at all, if you'd had your goodies now," replied Harry, smiling at this implication upon Rogers' character.

"Did she hurt you *very* much?" I asked, with tender anxiety, now that he had regained the use of his tongue. Hitherto, I had been only able to testify my sympathy by stuffing food down his throat,—seldom a bad way of reaching a boy's heart though, after all!

"Yes, it did sting, but not so badly as some that I've had. I always sing out loud, now, as though it hurt most awfully: then she hasn't the heart to hit so hard, you know!" and this time, Harry had so far recovered his usual spirits as to laugh outright.

"But Rogers didn't use to hate you so, before I came, did he?"

"We never cared for each other much. It was my punching him before all the fellows, that day when he turned you out of the swing, that makes him so savage with me. You see, he didn't lick me for it at first, because of your goodies; and it's too long ago, now, to do it openly. But he has never forgiven me, for all that. And that's why he was so glad to get me popped just now. It's the first bad row I've been in, this half."

"I do hate myself so!" I exclaimed, bitterly. "If I hadn't come, you wouldn't have been popped."

In all childish sincerity and good faith I said it, and as such he took it.

"If you had not come," he answered, warmly, rising as he spoke, and putting his arm lovingly round my neck, "I should never have known the very kindest, jolliest, little brick in the whole world!"

"You had better be off, now," said Anne, coming out of the kitchen, with a piled-up plate in each hand. "I'm going to ring the tea-bell, and they'll all be in here in half a jiffy."

With which graceful remark, she disappeared into the dining-room.





CHAPTER IV.

LOLLIPOPS AND MYSTERIES.

"WOULD you like to go down into the village with me this afternoon?" Miss Royce asked, one day, as I was passing through the hall, on my way to join the game going on in the playground.

"Oh yes, please, that I should!"

"Very well, and who shall go with us?"

I hung my head for a moment, fidgetting with the button on my Scotch cap.

Then, looking up, I answered in a quick dissyllable—"Rogers."

"Rogers?" exclaimed Miss Royce, in a tone of surprise, and, I thought, disappointment too.

"Yes," I answered, shyly, my cheeks turning a brilliant scarlet, "I know he wants to buy some reins, and I expect he'd like to choose them himself."

"Then you can run and tell him that he may go. You must both be ready to start in ten minutes, mind."

As I entered the playground, Harry Morland ran eagerly towards me.

"Here you are at last!" cried he, impatiently. "Mat Davis and I have been waiting for you ever so long; we began to think you were never coming. Come along to

our garden :—we've been making such a stunning little rockery."

"No. I can't, now. I'm going out with Miss Royce."

"You are? Where? Into the village?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll run in, and ask if I may go too. She's quite sure to let me."

Without waiting to hear my reply, he suddenly shouted, in a loud, clear treble, "Here, you fellows! we're going into the village with Miss Royce. Who wants to have any sweets bought?"

There was a general rush towards us at once. On Saturday afternoon, it was a long-established custom for any one going into Brookford to be commissioned with many sundry purchases at the confectioner's, greengrocer's, and various other shops of an attractive nature.

"Who's going?" breathlessly inquired the Scamp, who had, as usual, arrived at the head of the van, though he had had the longest distance to traverse of any one.

"Miss Royce and I,—and Rogers, if he likes," I answered, timidly glancing at this latter.

"My eye! how jolly! You don't mean that, young 'un? You had better not try it on, though, if you're only fooling!"

"No, indeed. I asked her myself," I said quickly, colouring with pleasure at having been at last successful in gaining his favour, though in never so slight a degree.

"You asked if I might go? Then I won't! What business had a squirt like you to go begging favours for me? If Miss Royce cares for the company of babies, who cry for their mam-mies when they come to school, she's at liberty to do so. For my part, I don't. But I suppose petticoats always do prefer each other's society—kind of 'birds of a feather flocking together.' And Miss Royce always was fond of little sneaking saints like you!"

As he finished, he turned on his heel and walked away.

From long use, I had grown to care less for his unkind speeches than I did formerly ; but as I listened to his angry words now, the flush of anticipation deepened into a hot glow of shame and mortification.

His outburst had silenced the clamour of the other boys for a brief minute, but now their voices swelled out again in louder chorus,—

“Never you mind him ! He’s only jealous, because he knows you’re such a favourite.”

“Here, Bernie, you bring me home a penn’orth of toffy.”

“An ounce of sugar-candy for *me*.”

“Liquorice for *me*, and Bath-pipe for Willie Robson :—mind you don’t forget.”

“Get *me* a skein of scarlet braid, for reins, you know. They *must* be scarlet, because Bill Knowles’ are green, and we’re going to use them together.”

“And *I* want some squashed dates from Roberts’,—mind you get them there, Brown’s are not half as good.”

Harry Morland had gone off in the sulks, after upbraiding me for my unfriendly conduct, as he considered it, and had carried Mat Davis with him.

So matters were beginning to look dismal, when Willie Knowles pushed forward, exclaiming, in a loud voice intended for Rogers’ benefit,—

“I’ll ask if I may go with you, instead of Rogers—I’m not too proud to walk with you, thank goodness ! Come along, or we shall be too late. And you fellows who want sweets and things must come down to the schoolroom, and I’ll stick it all down on paper ; or else we shall be bringing home ginger-root instead of Bath-pipe, and packets of blacking for butter-scotch, and all that sort of thing !”

So saying, he seized my hand and raced away to the house.

But the Scamp had no intention to be outdone, and in

Willie's efforts to prevent his getting ahead of us, I was nearly dragged off my legs ; until, by the time I reached the house, I felt as though my whole body would have been gradually stretched into legs, if the race had been continued much further !

Our visit to the confectioner's was deferred until the last ; for Willie Knowles—to whom permission to accompany us had been readily granted—had so many orders to execute there that we should be quite fully loaded with parcels on our return journey.

Here, while the bargaining was proceeding with much spirit, I wandered away from my companions, and amused myself by minutely examining the stock-in-trade.

On one shelf were arranged scores of little figures, moulded in sugar, white, red, or parti-coloured, representing mankind and the animal species, in all possible shapes, sizes, and conditions.

There was Little Red Riding Hood, with her scarlet cloak and hood ; old Father Christmas, and Blue Beard, one with snowy hair, the other looking as though he had been washing his face in one of the many cloth-mill streams running through the valley, and had managed to get his beard permanently covered with the indigo dye ; Punch stood flirting with Old Mother Hubbard, whilst Mrs. Judy placed herself gallantly between a brilliantly yellow lion, and a white lamb with black face and feet ; a pink-eyed rabbit towered far above a diminutive elephant ; and at the end came, evidently placed there by design, her Majesty Queen Victoria, calmly surveying her subjects, over another lion—a red one this time—crouching at her feet.

Then I wandered on, past the crackers and the tall jars of twisted barley-sugar, so transparently clear and bright, to the bottles filled with little sham fishes, whose ribbed sides, flat tails, and prominent eyes always struck my juvenile fancy so much.

So absorbed did I become in my researches, that at first I failed to hear Miss Royce, when—her commissions satisfactorily completed—she called to me to go.

“Bernie,—Bernard Ayres ! Are you so much engrossed that you cannot hear your own name ?”

Turning hurriedly, I found that she was just stepping from the shop as she spoke.

Ere I could follow her, I was arrested midway by a lady, whom I had not previously observed. She was dressed in deep mourning, and the thick crape veil, thrown carelessly back from her face, exposed here and there a tiny streak of white border beneath her black bonnet, evidently proclaiming the wearer a widow—comparatively youthful though she looked.

Placing a detaining hand upon my shoulder, she raised my chin with the other, and narrowly scanned my face.

“*What* did she call you ? What is your name, my dear ?”

“Bernard Ayres,” I replied, hastily, trying to free myself from her grasp.

Though too young to analyze the cause, something in her manner frightened me.

Her pale face flushed with a bright glow of colour, the hand resting upon me trembled, as she continued, in a voice thick with some suppressed emotion,—

“Tell me quickly—where do you live, child ?”

“Rockenham,” I answered, under my breath. In another minute, I should have set up howling, from sheer terror at the nature of this unexpected encounter, had not Miss Royce fortunately returned, just then, to summon me once more.

“Come, come, Bernie ; what are you dawdling over so ? If you cannot tear yourself away from so many attractions, I shall not be able to bring you another time !” she said, smiling amusedly at the girl behind the counter.

As we passed out, my strange interrogator called sharply for

a glass of wine, and looking in through the plate-glass windows, I saw her little daughter run anxiously to her, as she sunk back wearily upon her chair.

By the time we reached the great gate of the carriage-drive, the disagreeable impression produced by this little incident had entirely worn off, and, with a light heart, I ran forward to hold it wide open for Miss Royce and Willie to pass through.

The next day, being Sunday, we were assembled in the hall at the usual hour, choosing partners for the walk to and from church.

Harry had not yet forgiven me for what he persisted in calling my ill usage of him yesterday, and appeared determined to carry his sullenness to the extent of not asking me to walk with him as usual.

At any rate, he seemed glad of the excuse when Willie Knowles, being suddenly left partnerless, came up to me, saying,—

“Here, youngster! you come and walk with me.”

I looked appealingly towards Harry, in the hope that he would relent, and say that I was already engaged to him.

But no! He turned away, saying, as though it were a matter of complete indifference to him,—

“Oh, you can please yourself, Mat Davis is going to walk with me.”

It was heartless work to be on uncomfortable terms with my greatest friend, particularly when I remembered that we had not missed walking together any single Sunday since my admission into the school. However, there was some little consolation in the distinction of walking at the head of the school, with the oldest boy for my partner.

Then, too, I was wearing a new pair of knickerbockers for the first time, so that my spirits rose in spite of all adverse circumstances, as, with Willie's hand fast holding mine, I trudged resolutely along by his side.

How well I remember kicking out at the dead leaves, already falling from the trees with every strong gust of wind, admiring with great satisfaction, as I did so, the elaborately-braided pattern at my knees.

Half way through the service, I became insensibly conscious that I was being earnestly scrutinized by one of the occupants of a neighbouring pew.

Raising my eyes, they encountered, as I had involuntarily expected, those of the lady who had appeared so much interested in me on the previous afternoon. Next to her sat the same flaxen-haired, large-eyed, little girl who had been her companion then. Throughout the remainder of the service, I felt, rather than knew, that her watchful gaze scarcely ever left me; and very uncomfortable the sensation made me.

After church, as I looked back in a bend of the road, I saw that she had caught up Mrs. Royce, and was now apparently deep in conversation with her.

To my relief, she presently turned off into another road, without in any way noticing me, merely calling to her daughter to come back to her; for that young lady was marching contentedly by our side with Miss Royce, who had evidently made friends with her immediately, judging from the warmth of their conversation respecting the various merits of wax and "composition" dolls.

"Did you see the lady who walked part of the way home from church with me, Bernard?" inquired Mrs. Royce, at dinner-time.

"Yes, Mrs. Royce," I answered, falteringly.

"She introduced herself to me, saying that she was intimately acquainted with your father, though she did not think *you* knew her at all. But she is very anxious that you should go to spend a day with her soon—at her house across the valley, where she has lately come to live, 'Rose Cottage,' I think she said, was the name."

My heart sank at the news, and in response to her next question, as to whether I remembered my father ever speaking of "Mrs. Hughes," I was only able to utter a faint, "No, I don't."

At three o'clock Miss Royce apportioned to each of us the scriptural lesson to be learnt, or studied, during the rest of the day.

For the junior pupils the first few verses of the fifth of Matthew were selected, and from these we very young ones were allotted a verse each to learn by heart.

Miss Royce allowed us each to choose the one we preferred, after she had slowly and carefully read them all through to us.

"Johnnie Harris, by what name are these verses usually known?" she said, as she closed her Bible. "I told you last Sunday."

"Some long name beginning with B; but I'm sure I forget what!" and Johnnie looked foolishly ashamed of himself.

"Please, Miss Royce, I know!" cried Mat Davis, holding out his hand in the orthodox schoolboy way, to signify his readiness to speak as soon as permitted.

"Well, Mat, what was it?"

"The 'Beatitudes,'—from the Latin word 'beatus.'"

"Quite right—I am pleased to find that you have remembered it so well, Mat. 'Beatus' means 'blessed,' or 'happy,' and you noticed that every verse begins in our translation with the word 'blessed,' did you not? Now, Bernard, have you decided which to choose?"

"I like the one about peacemakers best, Miss Royce. May I learn that, please?"

"Why do you like it best?"

"Because,—because—oh, I don't exactly know; only I thought it was the nicest, when you read them over."

"It promises that 'they shall be called the children of God:' is that why?"

"Yes, Miss Royce," I replied, in a low tone.

"You can go and learn your texts on the lawn, as it is so fine and hot," she said, rising to dismiss us, without pressing me any further on the subject.

So we were all out of doors very soon after, scattered about in various groups.

Some sat under the shadow of the great, spreading fir-tree, standing old and dark in one corner of the lawn.

Others took advantage of the table in the arbour to rest their books and elbows, whilst Miss Royce and Miss Baxter, spreading shawls upon the grass, sat where they could command a general oversight of their numerous charge from under their parasols.

Even those who had chosen the seclusion of the arbour—formed in the angle of a thick laurel hedge bounding the garden—seemed to find it oppressively warm, in spite of the deep shade which it afforded from the rays of the noonday sun.

For a fine branching acacia twined its boughs overhead with those of a drooping laburnum, forming a kind of tent, with sides of evergreen shrubs, and a large Gueldres-rose tree standing sentry at the entrance.

For my part, I loved to lie basking in the heat of the sun, and accordingly placed myself, far away from any one else, right out in the centre of the lawn.

For some time I lay reading slowly, over and over again, the few simple words of my text, until they were implanted firmly in my memory.

Then, turning over on to my back, I yielded myself up to the keen enjoyment of lying perfectly still, and watching the grand face of nature, spread out so bountifully before me.

My task was accomplished, and my mind, consequently, free from all anxiety on that score ;—no slight incentive in itself to the complete enjoyment of perfect repose.

Stretched out before me, separated merely by a deep and narrow valley, lay vast hills, rolling away to the horizon in long undulations of wood or meadow-land.

Scattered here and there were tiny clusters of cottages, with a few houses of more or less pretensions, tacked on to their outskirts. Every now and then, a turreted tower, or a tapering steeple, peeping out from amongst a group of trees, proclaimed the various positions of the neighbouring villages.

Away to the right, a light filmy mist—the Sunday remnants of a week's busy work at the mills—hung over the blue-roofed, white-walled houses of "The Village," as it was always termed by us, who were dwellers in the most remote corner of this same parish of Brookford,—the most important of the many hamlets throughout the length of the valley, as its numerous tall chimneys abundantly testified.

Above, the sky was overcast with those grand summer clouds, so dazzlingly white, so marvellously shaped, that, as you lie gazing up at them in the bright sunshine, you can conceive nothing half lovely enough to vie with their exquisite beauty, unless it be the wondrous, snow-capped summits of the towering Alps.

Under their rolling shadows, the light green of the grass, and the sombre darkness of the far-off woods, merged into such delicate combinations of purple and rose colour, that the most consummate painter might well be baffled in his attempt to transfer the effect to his canvas, whilst preserving at the same time an appearance of truth and naturalness.

And then the glorious depth of the patches of blue sky ; all the bluer from the contrast of the fleecy clouds encircling them. So blue that the eye, wearied with vain attempts to fathom its depth, finally became haunted by the appearance of an infinity of air bubbles, dancing gaily in the pure, ethereal atmosphere above.



CHAPTER V.

A DREAM OF HEAVEN: AND A FUNERAL.

"OH, how beautiful!" I thought, lazily closing my eyes to enjoy the uninterrupted sunshine full upon my upturned face. "Oh, how beautiful to be one of the 'children of God'! for if"—and I thought it with all childish reverence,—“if God were like Father, and heaven far more beautiful than the loveliest spot upon earth, then indeed His children must be full of perfect bliss, with such a Father, and in such a home.”

But alas! there was the condition standing in the way of my ever attaining to such happiness.

For the text said, “Blessed are the *peacemakers*: for *they* shall be called the children of God.” And I? I was no peacemaker!

From the very first hour of my entering the school, I had caused a quarrel by my presence, and even at the present moment, I was not on good terms with my greatest friend. I had tried to gain Rogers' good-will all to no purpose, and now, as I pondered the matter over in my heart, fresh instances rose to my recollection, until the tears began to well up into my eyes at the thought of how vain it seemed for *me* to try to become one of God's little ones.

Gradually the sun and the air produced so soothing an

effect upon me that I fell asleep. As I slept, my fancy took up the thread of my waking thoughts, and wove it into my dream.

Only a few months ago, those three great pictures of Martin's—the "Day of Judgment," the "Great White Throne," and the "Plains of Heaven,"—had been exhibited in Rockenham. My father had taken me with him to view them, and the latter picture had produced so lively an impression upon my infantine mind, that I shall probably retain the most vivid recollection of its beauties whilst life lasts.

In my slumber I saw the scene again, in grander and more brilliant colouring, and with that strange distinctness which comes to us so often in our dreams.

And *I* was walking under that shady avenue, where the great trees, meeting overhead, cast a chequered shadow across the sunlight upon the velvet sward beneath.

A beautiful angel with folded wings walked by my side, holding my hand firmly in her own. Turning to speak to me, I discovered that her features bore a strong resemblance to those of my mysterious lady-friend, Mrs. Hughes.

But I was not afraid of her any longer, for her face bore a new expression of perfect tranquillity, and in her eyes shone a light so tender and kind, that my heart went out towards her at once.

Up the grassy slopes she led me, straying in among the shrubs now and again to cull some lovely blossom, hiding its modest head under the shelter of the rich undergrowth.

The air was fragrant with the perfume of a thousand rare and wondrous blossoms, the brilliant hues of which were alone surpassed by the gorgeous plumage of the long-tailed birds, crossing our path every now and again.

None of the usual timidity of bird or beast showed itself here. The deer went quietly on with their browsing as we passed, showing no sign of terror in their great calm eyes ; the

birds sang sweetly on in their undisturbed freedom, and the squirrels merely peeped down upon us with a passing air of curiosity.

It is only where the presence of cruel man has been known and felt, that the animal race is found to be first terrified, and then goaded, into savage self-defence.

Then we came to the foot of the hillock, lying in the foreground of the picture which seemed to form the framework of my vision.

Taking me gently in her arms, the angel slowly spread her glistening white wings, and flew noiselessly through the air to the summit.

Oh, the glory of the view which met my startled sight !

At the foot lay a lake of the deepest azure, reflecting, like a burnished mirror, all that lay upon its placid waters, and the line of beautiful trees encircling its shores.

Beyond, shrouded in a faint, light mist, like a cloud of incense brooding over hallowed ground, rose the dim outlines of the heavenly Jerusalem.

Immediately at its rear, and completely bounding the horizon, towered the snow-capped peaks of a giant range of mountains.

But the sound of sweet music stole softly upon my ears, and looking down upon the lake below, I beheld a tiny fleet of golden gondolas floating calmly upon its bosom.

Their richly-carved prows were wreathed with flowers, and on the crimson or blue draped decks reclined groups of children, whilst others, sitting at the side, trailed their white hands through the crystal waves.

And the children's voices floated sweet and clear across the waters to the shore :—

“ Suffer the children to come unto Me,
For of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Then the answer was wafted back from those who walked upon the margin of the lake :—

“ For I will be their Father,
And they shall be My children,
Saith the Lord.”

My heart filled with a great yearning as I listened, and I longed to run down the steep hill-side, and join the happy groups below.

But again those words sounded sadly in my ears,—

“ Blessed are the *peacemakers*: for *they* shall be called the children of God.”

This time it was the angel who repeated them, with a low, mournful wail in her voice, as though she, too, earnestly longed for me to become one of that favoured band of chosen ones.

Then I fell to the earth, and burying my face at her feet, sobbed forth, as though my heart would break,—

“ I *have* tried to be a peacemaker, indeed, indeed, I have. Oh, won't God love me, and let me be His child ?”

Suddenly I felt a strong pair of arms steal gently under me, and a voice that I knew so well ringing in my ears, with a cry of passionate, satisfied joy,—

“ My child ! My child ! At last !”

It was my father, with the white robes and dazzling wings of an angel.

With a cry of great contentment, I threw my arms about his neck ; whilst the angel-guide, in a voice of triumphant exultation, burst forth into a song of praise. And once more the burden of her strain was the same grand, beautiful, old words,—

“ Blessed are the *peacemakers*: for they shall be called the children of God.”

My dream was over, and as my eyes opened, I saw Miss Royce bending over me, and heard her say, cheerfully,—

"Why, little man, you *have* been to sleep, out here in the sun, and it is tea-time now. Didn't you hear the bell?"

But I was too much dazed with the glory of my dream to answer her, and closing my eyelids again, I allowed myself to be carried indoors, without uttering a sound.

Ah, how different now was my idea of heaven to the old notions I used to have, before I feasted my eyes upon the marvels of Martin's grand creation ; a Paradise in which white-robed angels floated for ever through a dull expanse of cloud-land, playing incessantly upon golden-stringed harps, or standing continually, with red, inflated cheeks, blowing long, unwieldy trumpets,—as do the cherubs in so many of Raphael's choicest pictures.

"If you please, miss," said Anne, putting her head round the corner of the school-room door, one day, "Mrs. Royce wants Master Ayres in the drawing-room."

My heart gave a great bound.

Had Father come to see me, without giving me any previous warning ?

Then my spirits dropped as quickly, for I suddenly reflected that the visitor was sure to be the lady who seemed so desirous of making my acquaintance.

My surmise proved perfectly correct ; there was the identical individual seated near the great French window, her little daughter standing at her side.

Though she kissed me warmly, and spoke very kindly, I was terribly shy of her during the whole of her visit, and felt ready, when permission was requested for me to pay her a visit, to tell Mrs. Royce that I didn't want to go.

However, it was a vast consolation to hear her say that she hoped I would bring some of my little friends with me, and under these altered conditions the prospect of a day's outing became positively pleasant.

Accordingly, it was arranged that on the following Friday my three greatest "chums" should accompany me across the valley, viz., Harry Morland, Mat Davis, and the Scamp.

To settle who the three should be, was no easy matter, for I was anxious not to leave out either Willie Knowles or Johnnie Harris; but Mrs. Royce would not hear of the party being increased beyond four.

"I am afraid even that number will be more than you can put up with, conveniently, if you are not strong. It really is very kind to ask them at all," she said, as her visitor rose to take leave.

That afternoon was our mid-weekly half-holiday. We had arranged to spend the time in conducting the funeral of one of Johnnie Harris's white mice, which had lately died from "accidental starvation."

This, at any rate, was the verdict of the jury of boys, self-elected to try the case.

For though in the evidence it had transpired that neglect to feed the deceased for two mornings running had been the cause of its premature death, yet it had also been proved that such negligence had arisen through an unfortunate misunderstanding.

Johnnie, being confined to the house with a cold, had asked Bob North to take his live stock in hand for a few days.

But Bob North had gone home on Saturday, being only a weekly boarder, and through the oversight occasioned by this arrangement, the poor mouse was discovered on Monday morning, lying stiff and cold on the floor of his cage.

Fortunately, his other pets had been well enough stocked to prevent actual starvation, though in one or two other instances the provisions had run dangerously low.

After the fatality had occurred, the other owners of live stock of course remembered having noticed the restless, uneasy state of the lamented deceased on the previous mornings, but

had not troubled to give the matter more than a passing thought ; for no one ever interfered with another's pets, unless specially desired to do so.

Both the boys concerned in the affair were seriously lectured by Mrs. Royce, who publicly announced that no live animals whatsoever should be allowed on the premises, if ever such a melancholy event happened again through carelessness.

Her caution discharged, however, she very kindly granted permission for us to bury the poor victim with all the ceremony we wished.

Accordingly, at three o'clock the boys assembled for the purpose of forming into a procession.

Amongst my numerous playthings was a small, black musical box, its works covered with transparent horn, which played three tunes with variations.

One of these was, "Oh, Willie, we have missed you ;" and this, though not as appropriate as might have been desired, was decided upon as the most suitable for the occasion. Such an addition to the performance was not to be despised ; so I was raised to the dignity of organist, and was placed in the front rank.

Harry and Mat walked one each side of me. Behind us came Johnnie Freeman, Jack Smedley, and another boy, Willie Knowles following immediately, alone.

We seven were all dressed in clean, white nightshirts over our clothes, reaching to our ankles. Round his shoulders Willie Knowles had fastened a large black silk scarf—borrowed from Miss Baxter—so tied as to fall in a long curve across his back. At his throat he wore pieces of white paper in the shape of lappets, for he was to be our officiating minister.

Next came the Scamp, his red hair flying about under the shadow of a great "Jim Crow" hat, with its brim carefully turned down all round.

His jacket was put on inside out, his trousers rolled up to



"WE ARRANGED OURSELVES AROUND THE GRAVE."

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his knees, whilst over his shoulder he carried a spade,—for he was gravedigger and filler-in.

By his side walked Rogers, bearing the wooden “tomb-stone,” which he, being particularly clever at such things, had cut into the required shape, and had printed upon it in clear type,—

“ HERE LIES THE BODY
OF
BEAUTY WHITE,
WHO DIED
OF SUDDEN STARVATION
BROUGHT ON
BY WANT OF FOOD.”

Behind them came the coffin-bearers, the coffin being constructed from an old slate-pencil box, filled with moss and newly-cut grass, and covered over with a heap of flowers, gathered from the boys' gardens.

Following immediately upon this walked Johnnie Harris and Bob North, the two chief mourners, two other boys from their dormitory being included in the ranks of the afflicted. Each of them bore in their arms some representative or other from the surviving live stock. Adorning the necks of the white mice, rats, and Mat Davis' white rabbit, were little collars of black braid, towards which mark of respect for the deceased many of them evinced a strong dislike.

Last of all came little Willie Robson, leading the great, black Newfoundland dog “Hero,” to whom, for the sake of contrast, he had attached a long, white, woollen comforter, forming at once a badge of mourning and a capital leading-string.

We set out, the tones of the musical box almost drowned for a time by the dismal, tuneless chanting of the clergyman and choir, and then sounding forth again with undiminished vigour, as the voices became spasmodic from suppressed laughter.

The grave had been dug in Johnnie Harris' garden plot, and now, as we arranged ourselves around it, the music was hushed

whilst Willie Knowles gabbled through a Latin exercise from the book he carried.

Then Johnnie and his companions threw little sprays of lavender, and a few flowers, upon the box, the Scamp cast in a spadeful of earth, and the ceremony was over.

Away rushed clergymen and choir, in undignified haste, to throw aside their robes of office. The mourners replaced their water-wetted handkerchiefs in their pockets, removed the unwelcome badges from the necks of the deputation of mourners from the animals, and started off to replace them in their hutches.

By the time we regained the playground, Rogers and the Scamp had completed their labours. At the head of the miniature grave stood the piece of wood, with its explanatory inscription.

Round the mound, which they had covered with grass, and bent twigs to keep it in place, they were making tiny paths of broken spar, and at each end had planted two little shoots of evergreen.

So pretty was the effect, when finished, that the consciousness of being sole proprietor of so unique a piece of garden decoration almost consoled its owner for the loss of his favourite mouse.





CHAPTER VI.

ROSES AND THORNS.

FRIDAY morning came all too soon ; for I could not conquer my dislike to the forthcoming visit, in spite of Harry's repeated assurances that it would be "most awfully jolly fun !"

Having undergone an extra amount of washing and brushing, we four were arrayed in all the glory of best suits, clean collars, tidiest gloves, and brightest neckties.

Even the Scamp's rough locks were successfully smoothened, at any rate for a time, and by dint of great pressure, his short trousers were induced to come low enough down to decently cover his boots.

When we were all spick and span, the school set off, for the boys were to take advantage of our going to Rose Cottage, to walk in that direction for their morning's ramble,—an indulgence generously granted to them as a set-off against the special good fortune of the favoured few.

As we approached our destination, we saw the little flax-haired girl out in the garden, apparently watching for our arrival. She ran hastily into the house as soon as she espied us, and the next minute returned with her mother, holding her by the hand.

Advancing quickly to open wide the gate, Mrs. Hughes exclaimed, warmly,—

"I am so glad to see that you have come yourself, Miss Royce ; and brought *all* the boys with you, I hope."

"Oh no, indeed ! *We* are going on to the top of the hill for a walk. Mrs. Royce always likes the others to have some little additional pleasure, when some of the number are enjoying any particular treat."

She did not, of course, mention that *she* was, really,—as all the boys knew—instigator, prime mover, and executor of so kind and thoughtful an arrangement.

"But you will, at least, come in, and rest awhile, after your toil up this steep slope ? *You* would like to, wouldn't you, boys ?"

There could be but one construction to the pleased smiles and appealing glances of every one, and so, without further parley, Miss Royce accepted the kind proposal.

"You will let me bring out some cake and wine to them ?" Mrs. Hughes asked. "There is nothing like eating, to set children at their ease."

"No wine, please. We never allow any of them to taste anything of that sort, while they are under our care."

"Oh, very well, then. I think I can find something they will like quite as well. Why, Mary, child, how quiet you have become all of a sudden ! I thought you intended to have such fine fun when the boys came !"

Mary turned violently red, and diving her head behind the folds of her mother's dress, tried to hide her confusion from the numerous eyes attracted towards her by this speech.

Why, I wonder, do parents invariably remark openly, before visitors and strangers, upon their children's shyness ? Would *they* find their embarrassment decrease, and their courage return to them, if public attention were directed to *their* little weaknesses or special failings ?

"Have you already forgotten Miss Royce, with whom you made such friends last Sunday ?" Mrs. Hughes continued,

endeavouring to make the child look up. "Well, never mind! Let us go and see what Eliza can find in the dairy for the boys' lunch. Ask Bernard Ayres whether he would like to come too."

Away we went, through the flower-scented hall, with its tessellated floor, and the air blowing freshly in through the open doors and windows, out to the dairy beyond.

What a delightful, sweet-smelling place a dairy is on a hot September day! with its refreshing coolness, its bright walls and clean floor, and the rows of shining pans laid out on the shelves, all full of rich, golden-hued milk and cream.

Evidently some one else thought so too, for, as Mary ran forward and opened the door, she uttered a startled scream, and a great tortoise-shell cat dashed wildly past us, and rushed out of sight in an instant.

"Oh dear, dear!" cried Mrs. Hughes. "There is that dreadful cat shut in there again. Whatever we shall do with her I can't think,—beating seems no use. This is the third time this week that she has managed to slip in and hide, is it not, Eliza?"

"I believe it is, ma'am," sheepishly replied the servant. "But at any rate she can't have done no harm this time, for I haven't come out of there myself, not half a minute, scarcely."

Fortunately for both Eliza and the cat, events proved such to have been the case.

In five minutes more, we were all four briskly running to and fro between house and lawn, bearing to the delighted boys great saucersful of curds and whey.

Jugs and tumblers were brought out next, and a plentiful supply of new milk provided to quench the thirst of so many parched throats.

But the bright eyes grew brighter, and opened wider, when Eliza finally appeared, carrying in either hand a large plate, piled high with slices of delicious sponge cake.

This was the sort of treatment to win the hearts of any schoolboys, and many were the exclamations of delighted approval which escaped between the mouthfuls.

"What a real old stunner she is!" exclaimed the Scamp, impulsively, as he helped himself to another big piece of cake; and so loudly was his flattering opinion expressed, that I looked up abashed, fearing lest the object of his admiration should have overheard.

From that moment my feelings completed the change which had been gradually taking place in my mind, and henceforth I regarded our kind hostess as the ideal of everything noble and good.

The sumptuous repast over, Mrs. Hughes prevailed upon Miss Royce to allow the boys to stay and play there, for an hour, instead of continuing their walk.

It was a fine old garden, with walks about in every direction, and many an old worm-eaten seat under the spreading branches, or encircling the twisted trunks, of some shady, thick-leaved tree.

Soon we were in full swing, playing at "horses," with a couple of stage-coaches conveying passengers from inn to inn, or taking up the mails from the various post-offices. There were enough boys playing to-day to give the affair a regular "go," with the full staff of conductors, post-masters, innkeepers, &c., and our complement of passengers as well.

Willie Knowles drove the "express coach," for he had the Scamp and Jack Smedley for his leaders. So fast they went, that Mary Hughes and I—now become firm friends—having taken tickets by it, from the yew-tree down to the harbour, had the greatest difficulty in keeping pace with them.

The braid reins forming the passengers' quarters dragged us bodily forward, as we leant our backs against them, but, by the time we pulled up at Willie Robson's post-office, we were both so exhausted that we were obliged to get out and rest,

until the slow coach should come up, and take us on to our destination.

This was at present making the return journey, along the path opposite, so we had plenty of time to sit and talk to Mr. Postmaster Robson.

He was busily engaged in punching holes in the laurel leaves, which always did duty as letters. So often had we played this game lately, that we had adopted a regular system of postmarks, formed by certain combinations of round holes.

These were usually punched through with the end of a metal pen-holder, or any similar instrument sharp enough to cut out a clean circle from the leaf.

Mary was greatly interested in the process, and Willie was carefully showing her how to drill the holes for his particular patterns, when the whistle was heard, announcing the approach of the second coach.

There were only two horses to this—Rogers and Bob North.

Harry Morland got out at this spot, and Willie Robson, having delivered his mails and received those from the yew-tree office, where Mat Davis presided, placed us in our "seats," and away we went.

"Let's give these two youngsters a jolly good spin down the hill!" cried Rogers, starting off immediately at full speed.

Away we raced, faster and faster down the sloping path.

At first we laughed merrily, and thought it great fun, until Mary presently began crying out that she couldn't run any further.

Johnnie Harris blew his whistle directly—the signal for the horses to pull up—but evidently Rogers had no intention of complying with any such orders.

We tugged hard at the reins, already strained tight from the rate at which we were going, and implored them earnestly to stop.

"Oh—please—stop—stop!" gasped Mary, "I—can't—go—any—"

But she was too breathless to finish even the last words of her sentence, and in her agony she began to cry.

"They shouldn't play if they can't run—the little babies!" shouted Rogers, back to Johnnie Harris.

The reins strained tighter round our waists, dragging us on against our will.

Suddenly, as the horses whisked round a corner, a sharp snap was heard, and in a moment Mary went sprawling headlong into a hedge of rosebushes, I following, and falling right on top of her.

Rogers ran on, with a chuckling laugh, but Bob North, finding that we both set up a vigorous howling, came back, and assisted Johnnie Harris to extricate us from our trying position.

"It was too bad of you!" cried Johnnie, indignantly; "I kept on shouting and whistling for you to stop. I can't see what fun there is in running youngsters like these off their legs."

But Bob North was genuinely sorry, when he saw the result of his thoughtlessness, for, as Miss Royce raised Mary from her thorny bed, her little hands were torn and bleeding from many a bad wound.

Fortunately for myself, I escaped with only a few slight scratches, which, though smarting and painful, were not very severe.

We must have presented a more pitiable than pretty appearance, as we were led quickly away to be bathed and doctored.

Of course the noise had brought every one running to the spot to ascertain its meaning, and many were the openly-expressed comments upon the ill-fated cause of the disaster.

"What a great stupid that Rogers is!"

"It was all his fault!"

"Just like him ! He always spoils all our fun !"

"I vote we send him to Coventry !"

And then, above the indignant voices, I heard Miss Royce giving the order to stop the game, and start for home at once.

Five minutes after, as I sat by the open window, bathing my face in warm water, I saw them all file through the gate, and noticed that Rogers and Bob North were obliged to walk together in the rear.

Willie Knowles turned, as he caught sight of me, and waved his hand, with a smiling nod, and pleasant "Goodbye, youngster ! you'll be all right again directly."

Dear old boy ! How my heart misgave me as I heard his cheering voice, and, for the third or fourth time, I reproached myself for not having included him amongst the number of my greatest chums.

But then, whom could I have left out ? Certainly not Harry, or Mat ; and then the Scamp ? Well, he was so jolly and good-natured, and had always been so kind to me, that if he had not been one of the party I should have been quite disconsolate.

So there was no help for it, and after all, he bore me no ill will for not having asked for him to be invited ; so, with a little troubled sigh, I lowered my head into the basin again, and recommenced the sponging operation.

After dinner, Mary and I were sufficiently recovered to go into the garden and play with the others.

The Scamp proposed that we should play "hide and seek," Mary being "jack-of-both-sides," and always going with the hiding party.

Accordingly we set off for the arbour, which was to be our "den," the Scamp, of course, heading the rush.

Turning the corner of a bank, which divided the lawn from the upper garden, he suddenly came to a dead halt, exclaiming,

"Just look here! They have gone away without Hero; here's the lazy old animal here now!"

At the sound of his voice, the big dog raised himself slowly, wagging his shaggy tail, and licking his great chops, with an air of sheepishness about him, as though he were ashamed of having been discovered enjoying a nap in such comfortable quarters as a periwinkle bed.

Slowly blinking his eyes at us in the bright sunshine, he put out his great paw, and offered to "shake hands," doubtless thinking that a scolding would be inconsistent after such a friendly greeting as that.

"Oh! you jolly old doggie! You were a dear old thing, to go off sound asleep and stay behind with us!" cried Mat, hugging the great creature affectionately.

Hero wagged his tail complacently, as though he understood it all perfectly.

Then he raised his head, and solemnly commenced licking Mat's face, stopping between each salute to gnash his jaws together with a sharp, powerful snap.

Mat and he were great friends. Indeed, to all the boys he was ever gentle and patient, unless they carried their teasing too far for even his forgiving spirit, when a low growl would warn them that in the gentlest nature lies an element of exasperation,—dormant, it may be, but none the less fierce on that account, when once it breaks forth.

Half-past five found us lingering over our tea, which Mrs. Hughes had ordered to be spread under a big tree upon the lawn.

Finding that we all voted for having it literally upon the ground, we had dispensed with tables and chairs, and were sitting round upon the dry grass, some cross-legged like the Turks, others lying full length upon their stomachs, as the nations do who live still further east.

"Please may I give Hero some milk?" Mat asked. "I have quite finished my tea."

"Certainly. The poor dog must be both hungry and thirsty by now," replied Mrs. Hughes, smiling.

"Oh, yes. But hasn't he sat good, all the time we've been eating and drinking? He never bothers you a bit at meals," said Mat, delighted to find a fresh listener to whom to sound the praises of his favourite. "Only it's almost as bad as asking—to look at you with such big, wistful eyes; but then, of course, he can't help *looking* like that, when he feels hungry, can he? Here you are, old doggie! Come along, then," and Mat, pouring a plentiful supply of milk into his saucer, placed it before the thirsty dog.

Hero sprang eagerly forward.

"Wait! You are not to touch it till you are given leave!" cried Mat, in a tone of authority. Though his lips had almost touched the coveted prize, Hero raised his head obediently, fixing his black eyes patiently upon the little tyrant.

"Look, Mrs. Hughes, isn't he good?"

"Quite a pattern to have in a school; eh, Sam?" said Mrs. Hughes, with a merry laugh at the Scamp, who had, unfortunately, crammed his mouth so full of buttered toast that he could not manage to reply, in spite of his most desperate attempts to choke himself by swallowing it whole.

"It was a shame to keep him from it any longer, wasn't it?" continued Mat, addressing the dog again. "Come, you may have it now," and he nodded vigorously.

Apparently Hero was doubtful for the moment as to whether or not Mat was really in earnest, but the next minute, with one wag of his tail, he fell to work.

As soon as his tongue tasted the milk, down went his tail between his legs, as the manner of most dogs is, whether they are guiltily conscious of helping themselves on the sly, or whether they are honestly employed in the enjoyment of food or drink. Only, in the former case, their tails may possibly disappear

somewhat further out of sight than they do when the repast is a legal one.

"You may take a biscuit for him, if you like," said Mrs. Hughes, evidently pleased to see how great an interest Mat took in the dog's welfare.

"Oh, may I? A whole one? A whole *big* one? Oh, *thank* you!" and Mat's face beamed all over with delight when Mrs. Hughes handed him the plate, and told him to select the largest he could find.

"Just look, Mary, he'll catch splendidly. You watch Mat throw it up for him," I said, jumping to my knees, and sitting back on my feet to get a better view.

"Here, Mat, I can shy straighter than you,—eversomuch!" cried the Scamp. "Let me try," he added, impatiently, stretching out his hand to seize Mat's biscuit.

For Hero, after successfully catching the first few pieces thrown to him from a short distance, had managed to miss a couple, one after the other.

"Oh, Sam, you mustn't take it away from Mat like that. You may have one for yourself if you like, but I cannot allow any quarrelling over it."

Sam looked ashamed of himself.

How easily we are abashed by the reproof of a stranger; but alas! how quickly we become hardened to the signs of their displeasure, as soon as the first restraint of shyness wears off.

"And may I have one too?" asked Harry.

"And I?" "And I?" echoed Mary and I, anxious to share in the general diversion.

"Then you must each take it in turns to throw it to him."

So Hero was soon standing under the fire of five persons, and most amusing it was to see him dart about from one to another of the falling pieces, his great jaws clashing together with a crack,—sometimes upon nothing at all!

Occasionally one bit went in rather sooner than he expected, and nearly choked him, by slipping down his throat almost before he knew that it was in his mouth.

We wound up by all flinging at once, and laughed heartily as, in his efforts to catch several together, he rolled backwards head over heels down the grass.

Then we turned to go.

"Oh, we *have* enjoyed ourselves *so* much!" cried Harry Morland, emphatically.

"I should just think we have!" seconded the Scamp, cramming into his pockets a large bunch of grapes, from the plateful being held out to us as a parting gift.

"I don't like them, thank you," I said, shaking my head, when it came to my turn.

"Don't like grapes? Oh, you funny boy! But I remember now that Francis never cared for fruit when he was little; your father I mean, you know. Oh dear! I quite forgot myself,—I promised—"

She bit her lip, and stopped short.

I had not noticed, particularly, what she said, for she seemed to be speaking more to herself than to me. But now, her altered manner brought the sound of her words back to my memory, and I mentally resolved to ask my father, on the first opportunity, whether he was as well acquainted with this strange friend of mine, as she seemed to be with him.

"If you wouldn't mind, though," I asked, timidly, "I should like to carry my share home with me. I'd like to give Johnnie Harris some; he's so fond of them, and he wanted so to stay with us this afternoon."

Secretly, I decided to offer part to Rogers, being still anxious to conciliate him, and to ingratiate myself into his favour.

Whether this was a sneakish piece of "toadyism," or a genuine desire to walk in the spirit of my Sunday's dream, I could never quite decide.

Should I take so much pains to gain the approbation of one whom I really disliked as thoroughly, but feared less? I could not exactly say.

"Good-night, and thank you ever so much," said Mat, putting up his happy little face to be kissed. "And won't you shake hands with Hero, please? I'm sure he'd like to, for he has had such a splendid tea."

So we passed out through the little wicket-gate, into the quiet country lane, Mrs. Hughes and Mary standing, with eyes shaded from the setting sun, to watch us out of sight.

"Go straight home, boys, and don't loiter on the road, there's good children. You were to have started at a quarter *to* six, and there is the village clock striking a quarter *past*! But you will be home, now, long before it is dark."

With which parting caution sounding in our ears, we started off at a brisk trot down the hill, turning at the corner to wave our hats and handkerchiefs, and to shout a last "Good-night!" before disappearing from view.





CHAPTER VII.

DAWDLERS.

It is hard work for very young people to walk soberly down a very steep hill, so—though we had been playing busily almost the whole day long—a race to the bridge at the bottom was proposed, seconded, and carried.

I was allowed a start from yonder big boundary-stone, sticking upright in the bank, Mat and Harry standing together about half-way between the Scamp and me, for, being by far the swiftest runner, he, of course, came last.

“Oh, you little cheats!” rang cheerily out the Scamp’s voice, as I set off, followed by the other two, without waiting for the signal.

Away we tore, over the stones and the deep cart-ruts, along this piece of comparative level, down another steep little pitch, on, on, until my head seemed inclined to jerk itself off my shoulders, and my neck to threaten dislocation at every fresh step!

The bridge came in sight, round a sudden turn in the road.

Hurrah! I am still in front, and in two minutes more I shall be at the goal.

Nearer and nearer; and now the laughing voices behind me

greet the Scamp with a disapproving howl, as, one after the other, he catches up and passes them.

Then I heard their voices calling loudly,—

“Well run, Bernie ; don’t let him pass you.”

And in his excitement, Harry shrieked,—

“Go it, young’un ; you’ll lick him. Well run, indeed, for a kid !”

This from a small boy only three months older than myself ! But I heeded not the air of patronage, being spurred on only by the kindly tones of encouragement.

Hurrah ! I have actually conquered, but at the expense of losing my breath, and gaining in its place that unwelcome visitant—the “stitch.” Exhausted, I threw myself down on the grassy banks of the mill-stream, just across the bridge ; rolling over from side to side, as I held my aching sides, and screwed up my tired legs, until my knees were within an inch of my chin.

“Bravo ! well you *can* run for a youngster, and no mistake !” cried the Scamp, flinging himself down beside me, his face aflame, and his carrotty hair tossed wildly over his eyes.

For, following our youthful instincts, we had all snatched our caps hurriedly from our heads, as soon as the race began, carrying them in our hands—our arms going backwards and forwards all the while, like pendulums to the old Dutch clocks.

Hero had run on ahead at first, but finding that we had all settled down to rest comfortably on the grass, he trotted solemnly back to join us.

Seeing my face so conveniently near the ground, he couldn’t resist the temptation of stopping to smother me with his usual slobbering caresses. With a dog’s pertinacity, the more I tried to ward off his damp kisses, the better fun he thought it ; until it became quite an exciting trial of skill to see whether or no I could prevent his finding the slightest chink between my outspread hands, wherein to insert his wet, cold nose upon my face.

Suddenly he heard himself called, and bounded off, leaving me to rise and follow at my leisure.

Down by the water's edge stood the Scamp, energetically engaged in cutting off a stubborn shoot from a willow-tree growing there, whilst Harry, seated on a large, loose stone, fallen from the rickety old bridge, calmly watched his vigorous struggles.

"Why are you like French beans, Scamp?" asked Harry, with an amused smile, balancing himself meanwhile upon the extreme summit of the rounded stone.

"Can't say!" replied Sam, shortly.

"Because you are a 'scarlet runner'!" said Harry, going off into a fit of laughter at this brilliant hit at the Scamp's heated appearance after his race.

"Oh, come, Harry—you didn't make that up, I know!" exclaimed Mat, when our amusement had somewhat subsided.

"I did!" retorted Harry, warmly.

Happily, any further overtures towards anything like a squabble were at this point diverted, by the sudden apparition of the Scamp's feet flying into the air above his head, which latter extremity seemed to be in imminent danger of coming into contact with the ground. For the stick at which he had been labouring so perseveringly, cutting, twisting, pulling, had, without any previous warning, given way to a rather fiercer jerk than usual, sending the conqueror ignominiously sprawling on to his back. So immoderately did Harry laugh at this catastrophe, that, in an unguarded moment, he, too, slipped off his perch, which set us all off roaring with renewed laughter, as each one rose from his ungraceful roll on Mother Earth.

Hero began to jump round us, barking excitedly, as though he, too, greatly enjoyed the joke. So the Scamp, anxious for him to provide his share of the entertainment, sent the stick whizzing through the air, with a "Hie in then! fetch it out—

good dog !” The stick fell with a thwack upon the water, and started off at once for a gentle float down stream.

With a wild yelp, Hero plunged in, paddled swiftly after it, caught it with a quick dab of his mouth, before the sluggish current had carried it beneath the arch of the bridge, and turning, brought it triumphantly ashore, wagging his tail and looking out of the corners of his eyes, as much as to say, “Don’t you wish you were half as clever as I ?” Then, laying the trophy at Sam’s feet, he commenced shaking himself vigorously, spreading his four legs wide, and scattering the water from his shaggy sides, in showers dense enough to serve any one for a shower-bath, who might happen to be standing within a yard or two of him.

We had some difficulty in avoiding a wetting, for all dogs, it seems to me, take a malicious pleasure in creeping up close to people, as soon as they come out of the water, and treating them to as prodigal a sprinkling as they can be tricked into.

“Let *me* throw it now !” I cried, and running forward, I seized the dripping stick, and threw it with all my might, before any one could intercept my scheme.

Alas ! for my aiming powers.

The stick flew off at a tangent, struck the parapet of the bridge, and falling vertically down, lodged on a projecting ledge of stone, which stretched from side to side a few inches above the crown of the arch.

“Oh dear ! oh dear ! I’m *so* sorry,” I said, humbly, “but I’ll cut you another, Scamp, if you’ll lend me your knife.”

The Scamp rarely got cross with any one, so instead of flying into a rage, as many of the boys would have done, he merely said, more forcibly than elegantly,—

“Well, you are a little cock-eye ! I must say ; but I’ll get it again, somehow.”

“You can’t possibly ! we cried, dissuasively.

“I mean to try. And I’ll do it, too !”

"But we must go on, Scamp, or we shall be so late," said Mat. Besides, we promised not to stop about."

"Yes. And Mrs. Royce is sure to ask Mrs. What-d'y-e-me-call—"

"Mrs. Hughes," I suggested.

"Yes. She's sure to ask her when we started," echoed Harry; "and then shan't we look pretty, when she finds what an age we've been on the way?"

"Oh, never care!" cried the Scamp, "we'll run again presently, to make up. But I intend to get that stick first."

"Oh don't, don't!" we all exclaimed, imploringly.

But the Scamp was inflexible, and only made answer by running on to the bridge, and leaning ever so far over the parapet, just above the spot where the stick lay. In vain, though; for it was quite out of his reach.

"Here, you fellows, come and hang on to my legs!" he shouted.

So Mat caught tight hold of one foot, whilst Harry and I held on to the other.

Still it was useless, for, with more than half his body hanging over, the stick was a good foot below his outstretched fingers.

Hero seemed uneasy. He leapt on to the flat stone coping, and stood close over the Scamp, sniffing ominously round him, and once or twice catching his coat between his teeth.

"It's no go!" said Sam, slipping reluctantly back to his feet, his face flushed with the exertion.

"Leave it, do, and come on!" cried Harry, impatiently.

"I shan't!—so there! I *will* get it—just because I said I would!"

"Well, let's run on, and leave him behind," suggested Harry;—a proposal which met with no response.

For, without another word, the Scamp ran down to the side of the bridge again, and mounting on to the slight, projecting

cornice, set out to reach the spot by traversing this narrow ledge on the tips of his toes.

Clinging with both hands to the edge of the parapet, he sidled cautiously along, squashed close in against the wall, warily treading his way a step at a time.

Breathlessly we watched his progress from below—Harry and I, that is—for Mat and Hero remained on the bridge, the dog walking restlessly to and fro along the wall, raising his head every now and then to utter a low, piteous whine.

"I've got to it!" exclaimed Sam, exultingly, turning a grinning look of satisfaction upon us.

But the difficulty was to pick the stick up.

Calling to Mat to cling fast hold to his arm, he let go with the other hand, and gently lowered himself.

After having come so far with so much difficulty, it would be too tantalizing to have to turn back defeated. To kick the stick into the water was an alternative course, certainly; but an underhand way of doing things, and only to be resorted to when every legitimate means should fail.

"Have one more try, Mat!" he cried; "I am sure I can get it, if you'll only lean further over."

Mat stretched himself to the utmost. Slowly, but surely, the Scamp's fingers came nearer and nearer to the coveted prize.

Suddenly Mat called out, in a tone of agony, "Come up, Sam; I can't hold you—I can't, indeed!"

Two inches more—one inch, and it would be between his fingers. Just a jerk, which should stretch and strain Mat's arm for one brief second, and then, with a rebound like that from a piece of tightly-strained elastic suddenly set free, up he would fly into his old place—victor!

Without a second thought, without any warning, in the heedless, absorbing excitement of the moment, he made a sudden, quick lurch towards the object of his ambition, and clutched it firmly in his hand.

A shout of triumph ; succeeded in one brief moment by a cry of terror ; a falling body ; a splash in the water ; a black mass springing through the air, and lost for a moment in the stream ; and then we on the bank became dimly conscious that Hero and the Scamp were struggling in the water.

How long it takes to write of such things, and yet how quickly they are really over, though at the time of their occurrence the moments may seem like minutes, and the minutes hours !

Sam did not lose his ready presence of mind ; only we on the shore looked on helplessly.

He rose to the surface directly, spluttered violently, swished the long hair back from his eyes, and struck out for the land.

Hero was at his side in an instant, and pulling, pushing, struggling, kicking, the two reached the edge almost as soon as Mat, who, on feeling Sam's hand loose its hold, had run hastily down from the bridge.

The stream was very narrow ; you who are good swimmers could cross it in three or four bold strokes, but to poor Sam, who was only just learning to swim, it would have been no such easy matter to reach dry ground, but for the noble Hero's timely assistance.

We helped to pull Sam out of the weeds and mud, and then, sitting forlornly down upon the grass, we looked into one another's scared faces in dead silence.

Poor Mat was quite unnerved, and was weeping silently ; in which particular I also kept him company, for my tears, too, came only too readily.

Hero, after shaking himself well, came and smelt all round Sam, appeared satisfied with the result of his investigation, and passed on to Mat.

Regardless of his sopping condition, Mat threw his arms impulsively round the big dog's neck, burying his tear-stained

face upon the shaggy head of his sympathizing friend. Hero evidently felt proud of such a distinction, and appeared anxious to comfort his little companion, by testifying his affection in every possible way.

Presently Sam burst out into a low, hollow laugh.

"I thought Hero would have come down right on top of me, when I saw him leap in from the bridge ; but he aimed splendidly. If it hadn't been for him, I don't know where I should have been now—down at the bottom, perhaps ; who knows ? But shan't I catch it just ? Do look at my breeches. Well, at any rate, I've got the stick all right : I didn't let go of *that*, I'm proud to say !"

Apparently he cared more about that than anything else just then ; and I think, down in our heart of hearts, *we* admired his coolness and pluck a good deal more than we need have done, seeing how foolhardy his conduct had really been.

"She's sure to find you out, you know," said Harry, presently, ruefully surveying his friend's clothes as he spoke. "You've been into the mud right up to your knees."

"I know. The bank's as soft as putty ; I sank in every step, as soon as my feet touched it, and I can't get it off, to save my life."

"To save a popping, you mean !" put in Harry, with a grim laugh.

"No fear ! She won't pop me ; I'm too big for that—I'd like to see her at it ! She will shut me up for a fortnight in my bedroom, more likely, and feed me on bread and water, and boiled rice."

In our vocabulary, "She" always stood for Mrs. Royce.

"Oh, Sam, how can you ?" I cried, indignantly. "You know she never shut up any one for more than three days,—not even when Brown threw those books at Miss Baxter's head."

"You know nothing at all about it, younker ; you're her

favourite, so of course you like her, and so I ain't going to argue with *you*," and Sam kicked viciously at his trousers.

Under the operation of scraping and peeling that was going on, the cakes of dirt were being steadily converted into a thin veneering of slimy, grey-coloured mud, which seemed even more hopelessly impossible to remove than the more conspicuous lumps had proved.

"Sam, you'll catch your death of cold, sitting there in wet things. We ought to have gone on directly, instead of staying about like this," said Mat, rising slowly, and wiping his eyes gingerly.

"No fear!" returned Sam, using his favourite expression. "I ain't delicate, like some of you kids; 't isn't the first time that I've been in the water with my clothes on. If it weren't for this vile dirt on my breeches, *she* would never know anything about it, for all the harm it would do me."

I had jumped up, too; so, placing our hands under Sam's arms, we pulled him to his feet.

"My goodness! how sopping you are! You'll never get dry to-night!" cried Harry.

"I'm wet, of course, you little silly; but I shall get dry enough to slip by to bed without her noticing, I hope. Only I shall never be able to get this confounded mud off, for ever so many hours."

"Oh, Sam! how can you talk like that!"

"Like what?"

"Why, to use such a wicked word!"

"Do you mean 'confounded'?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"Oh, you're such a little innocent; you've never been to school before. But you'll soon get over that sort of thing; oh, 'confounded' is only a bit of slang—it's nothing at all, I assure you.

"Well, it's what the cabmen and all those wicked men say, and I'm sure you oughtn't to use it."

Then, as Sam burst into a merry peal of laughter at my classing cabmen under the head of "wicked men," without any limitations, I ceased my mild rebuke, and fell to wondering whether the time would come when *I* should use such words without a qualm of conscience—aye, and perhaps far worse ones, too—and should look back with a sort of pitying contempt for my queer, prudish notions about "naughty words."

Alas! Alas! the time came only too soon, when worse expressions than these fell unheeded and unregarded as obnoxious, upon ears grown callous from long custom, and when my lips framed readily the polluted epithet, or the vulgar phrase most in vogue in the school, with an indifference I should have been wholly unable to imagine in these early days of my school life.

Any further discussion on the subject was put an end to by an abrupt exclamation from Harry,—

"Hullo! What *ever* has Hero got in his mouth?" he cried, as the old dog came trotting up to us from the water's edge, where he had been poking about among the weeds and sedges for the last few minutes.





CHAPTER VIII.

"SPRING-HEELED JACK."

"WHY, it's some one's hat!" exclaimed Mat, running forward to meet Hero; and taking it from the dog's mouth, he began to pull it into shape, whilst Hero stood calmly looking on, with an expressive wag of the tail, and a proud look in his eyes, which said quite plainly, "*I found that; ain't I clever?*"

"It's mine!" cried the Scamp, putting his hand up suddenly to his head; "I'm blessed if I hadn't forgotten all about my hat in the general excitement,—it's a wonder I haven't lost my head as well!"

We all laughed heartily; and Harry wondered how far we should have gone before any one would have noticed so obvious an omission in the Scamp's attire.

"I noticed once that you hadn't got it on your head, but I supposed you were drying it somewhere," said Mat; "then something else drove it out of my head, and I forgot to say anything again."

"Well, thanks to Hero, it's all safe now," replied Sam, patting the dog affectionately, and then adding, ruefully, as he surveyed its dirty condition, "There'll be something to do to get that clean and tidy enough to pass muster, without being found out."

"But you will tell Mrs. Royce all about it, won't you?" I asked, in great surprise.

"Not I ! I ain't so green. And don't *you* go blabbing either, youngster. She's pretty safe to worm it all out of us, but don't you help her,—mind that."

"Very well," I replied, in a low voice. To me it was a new idea to keep back any of the incidents of my day's adventures, whether they were good, bad, or indifferent.

But, as in the case of the popular language, I was soon a quick adept at profiting by the precepts of my elders, and, before long, was as good a hand as any one at concealing my failings from the knowledge of the authorities bearing rule over us.

Sam was too open and honest a boy to plan any systematic string of falsehoods to screen himself with ; though he did not consider himself in honour bound to help the enemy to discover his faults, by an open proclamation of the truth, he would never shrink from giving a direct answer to a plain question, however much it might compromise himself. This was the principle which he laid down for our guidance, to-night ;—beyond which, he assured us, it was unnecessary, on the one hand, and on the other dishonourable, for any of us to go. Whether such an opinion were strictly sound, I rather doubt ; but whether one can expect a higher standard of morality from the ordinary, easy-going schoolboy is a question not quite so easily answered.

"*Do* come on !" cried Mat, impatiently, as soon as Sam had wrung most of the water out of his Scotch cap. "I declare it's beginning to get dark already."

"It'll be pitch dark by half-past seven," said the Scamp, indifferently.

"And it must be past seven by now," remarked Harry, with a faint tone of alarm in his voice.

"And it will take us half-an-hour to walk home," I added.

"More," shortly rejoined the Scamp.

"Then we must cut like billywinks," cried Harry, who delighted to indulge in slang as much as any of the bigger boys.

So at last we set off full-swing along the level, running at a

gentle trot half way up the hill, for the road soon began to rise again.

"I say," said Harry, taking my arm, and whispering into my ear, as soon as we had subsided into a brisk, steady walk, "are you afraid of the dark?—*I* am—horribly."

"Yes, I am, dreadfully," I replied, in a low tone, glad to find some one to confide in, who not only sympathized with, but also shared in, my special weakness.

"Well, don't you let the Scamp know; he'd laugh at us no end."

"Would he? Doesn't *he* mind, then?" I asked, incredulously.

"Not he!"

Presently Harry commenced speaking afresh:—

"You know that lonely part of the road that we're coming to, between the top of this hill and the sweet-shop, where we buy those whapping big 'bulls'-eyes'? Well, it is somewhere there where 'Springall Jack' frightens people so."

"Let's keep up with the others," I interposed, hurrying on.

"He scared Old Betsy half out of her skin," continued Harry, his voice sinking into a low, awed whisper. "I heard Miss Royce telling Mrs. What's-her-name."

"Mrs. Hughes, do you mean?"

"Yes; they were talking about him ever so long. When we were playing 'I spy,' I was hiding just behind that summer-house that's been made in the big yew-tree close by the edge of the lawn, where they were sitting together talking; so I couldn't help overhearing all that they said."

"You didn't try, I suppose?"

"Rather not! I listened with all my might; it was quite exciting. You've heard about 'Springall Jack,' haven't you? 'Spring-*heeled* Jack' he used to be called at first, because he is supposed to wear boots with such enormous springs in them that he can clear a six-foot wall at a single bound. So he goes

about in the lonely parts of the country, scaring people awfully, by suddenly jumping over a gate or a hedge, right in their very faces, just when they are walking quietly along, never dreaming of any one being near them, and before they can say 'Jack Robinson,' he has sprung over the opposite wall, and has disappeared from their sight, uttering a yell that makes their blood run cold. But now the name for him has got corrupted into 'Springall Jack,' because it's shorter, as well as more expressive, don't you see? Some of the people have shortened it still more by calling him 'Springle Jack;' you'll hear all the boys speak of him so, down in Brookford; but I like to see it spelt 'Springall' best, even if you do pronounce it like 'Springle,' as most people do. Sometimes he lies by a heap of stones, till his victims come close up to him; then he jumps up suddenly, flings up his arms, and, with an unearthly shout, springs past them, and disappears over the wall, or hedge. He has half killed some people from sheer fright, and the bobbies are after him, to try and catch him. Only they don't know who he is at all, and he don't give them much chance to find out either!"

"Oh dear! oh dear! I wish we hadn't stopped by the stream; we should have been at home by now."

"What's all that about?" demanded the Scamp, overhearing the last few remarks, as we came up with him and Mat.

At the end of the recital, which Harry willingly repeated for their benefit, the Scamp tried to reassure us, by remarking cheerfully, "Oh, you needn't be scared; he's safe not to be in the same place again to-night. It wouldn't pay, don't you see? He would be caught, sure enough, if he tried that on."

"But, you see, he watches for people who are certain to be dreadfully frightened, and who can't do anything. If he saw, or heard, the bobbies coming, he'd be off like a shot, and they would never see him at all."

"Besides, he's sure to go where he's least expected; and if

he thought people would think that he wouldn't be two nights running in the same place, he would be sure to come; do you see what I mean?"

"But isn't it too early, to-night?" I suggested, anxiously.

"It was no later than this, last night, you may be sure; Old Betsy wouldn't be out alone long after dark, I'll bet."

"Why didn't she give the alarm?"

"'Cause there's no house anywhere nearer than that 'tuck'-shop, and she was too scared to know anything, except that she was being followed by a great tall figure, with a long cloak over his shoulders. He wasn't the least like any one she had ever seen, she said. She began to scream, and cut for it like old boots, and never stopped until she got safe home. He chased her ever so far along the road."

"It is very lucky that we have Hero with us," said the Scamp, gravely. "I'll tell you what; we will all hitch up together. You go the other side, Mat, and we'll have the youngsters between us. I will lead old Hero."

"No, no! Hero shall stop by me!" cried Mat, earnestly.

"All right! I don't care. Only you had better lead him, so that you can keep him close by us. You needn't get scared, youngsters. Even if it is all true—which I doubt—the fellow is hardly likely to be here again, to-night."

"No, no. Of course he wouldn't," echoed Mat, as though anxious to convince himself that the pleasantest view of the case must necessarily be also the most correct.

Nevertheless, even the Scamp dropped his voice when he spoke, and clearly none of us felt very comfortable.

As for me, my eyes were already on the brink of an overflow from the effects of Harry's recital, and in my desire to catch any suspicious sound that might warn us of our danger, I strained my ears till the drums seemed ready to crack, from the undue amount of tension to which they were subjected.

For some minutes we walked arm-in-arm in absolute silence,

save for the footfalls which seemed to ring out clear and distinct, telling of our approach, in spite of our cautious endeavours to tread as noiselessly as possible.

Vainly my eyes strove to pierce the gloom, for in these deep lanes the darkness gathers quickly, as soon as the evening sun goes down. Not even the faint glimmer of a crescent moon shed its light upon us at this early hour; only, through a break in the spreading clouds, the shimmer of a few pale, twinkling stars caught our eyes every now and then.

Presently the Scamp's voice broke the stillness, sounding startlingly clear and loud, when each faculty was so keenly alive to the slightest rustle.

"What a confounded fool I was! If I hadn't bothered about this vile old stick"—throwing it impatiently over the hedge as he spoke—"we should not have been in for a row at all, and now, *I*, at any rate, am in for a double one; and you will all catch it pretty hot, too, I expect."

"It was *my* fault," I began, whimpering; "if I had not thrown it so"—but my voice suddenly failed me, dying away into a little, half-checked sob.

But the dread of future evil, in the shape of probable punishments, paled into insignificance before the terror of the present moment; for we had gained the summit of the hill, and were entering upon the long stretch of road, where the encounter of the previous evening had taken place, which had been so graphically described to us by Harry.

Here the thick foliage of the banked-up hedges suddenly ceased, and in their place the road was bounded by rough stone walls some four or five feet high,—higher, at any rate, than the top of even the Scamp's comparatively lofty head.

Tremblingly, but in safety, the first half of this lonely stretch of ground was passed over. Not daring to leave go of either of my companions, I hurried on in a state of alarm and agitation I had never before experienced; the tears running down

my cheeks and dripping off the end of my nose, until I was obliged to put out my tongue and suck in my lips, as the only means of getting rid of them, seeing that I could not venture to liberate either of my hands, even for a moment.

Even now, when I walk through country lanes on a dark night, the recollection of the taste of those salt tears rises forcibly to my mind, and over the leafy hedge-rows, I conjure up the hiding forms and peering faces which every waving bough seemed to shadow forth to my heated, childish fancy on this eventful night.

Just as the word was uttered, in a low, sharp whisper by the Scamp, for us all to run through the remainder of this dreaded reach, we were thrown into a ferment of fear by hearing a low, deep growl from Hero. The next moment, uttering a quick, fierce bark, he broke loose from Mat, and with one swift spring forward, was lost to us in the darkness. Our hearts stood still. Alone, in this terrible darkness, with this unknown evil close beside us, and our sole protector vanished from our sight ! No one spoke. Simultaneously we all halted ; go forward we dared not, and to turn back we were afraid.

With a swift, noiseless motion, that startled me with its suddenness, the Scamp threw his arms round Harry and me, and clasping Mat's hands firmly in his, drew us gently under the shadow of the wall. Here, for one brief moment that seemed an hour, we stood, huddled close together, fearing to move, and scarcely breathing from fright, lest we should bring upon ourselves the very calamity we so dreaded.

Another sharp, short bark from Hero. Then he was not so far off, after all !

A sudden whizzing past us, as of flying garments, and we were conscious—all of us but Harry, who, with a silent shudder through his whole frame, had buried his face on Sam's shoulder—that a huge, shapeless form had risen above the level of the wall, almost grazing us as we cowered down before it, and,

standing out for a moment in black relief against the leaden sky, had sunk slowly down again upon the other side.

Before we had time to draw a gasping breath of relief, another sound riveted our attention. It was the quick scrabbling of feet upon the stones, and the next moment a long, lithe body rose above our heads, and dropped down upon the other side as quickly as the first had done.

"It's Hero!" whispered Mat, under his breath.

"Is *he* gone?" asked Harry, eagerly, lifting his head; and from his tone we all knew that the "he" was not intended for Hero.

"Oh dear! Oh dear!" I exclaimed, stamping my feet in my agony, "whatever shall we do? We can't go on without Hero, and I daren't stay here!"

"Call him back, Mat," whispered the Scamp.

"I'm afraid to call out!" returned Mat. "*He* would come back, if he thought we were here now."

"He will, in any case, I expect. I'm afraid of seeing him come flying over the wall every minute. It's all my fault. What a fool I was!" cried the Scamp, ruefully.

He paused in his self-reproaches, to try and cheer us up.

"Stop blubbing, there's good youngsters," he said, kindly,—
"or at any rate don't let him hear you."

"Hark!" cried Mat, abruptly.

Every one drew in his breath.

Across the silence of the night rose sounds which made my heart thump vigorously against my sides.

Hero was growling fiercely, loudly,—breaking forth now and again into a pained, angry bark, as the dull thud of a stick, and the deep tones of a man's voice, fell upon our ears, telling us plainly that, amongst a volley of oaths, our faithful old dog was defending us from harm, perhaps at the peril of his very life.

How long we stood with ears and eyes strained, vainly, to know better what was going on, I cannot tell.

"Run!" suddenly cried the Scamp, in a loud, decisive whisper. "Don't make any noise, though."

Our trance was broken through. Without waiting for a second invitation, away we raced, our minds filled with the one absorbing desire to escape from this terrible thing behind us. Fright gave wings to my feet, and helped me to keep pace with the others, in a way that would have been wholly impossible under ordinary circumstances.

My back seemed to grow hot and cold by turns as I scurried along, feeling, in my excitement, as though the dreaded being might even yet place a restraining hand suddenly upon my shoulder, and drag me back to nameless horrors.

"Look! look!" cried Harry, suddenly, "there's a light, a light!"

"So there is. *He* has got in front of us. Oh horror! what *will* become of us?"

"No, no. It's not he," said the Scamp, decisively. "He had no lantern. Don't stop running, for the life of you. Anything—anybody, is all right,—so long as it is not he."

Nearer and nearer came the light, as we sped on, breathless and exhausted.

Then a voice called clearly through the darkness,—

"Sam—Sam Camp—is that you?"

Oh heavens! we are safe at last. It is Miss Royce's voice sounding so sweetly to our poor affrighted souls.

With a wild scream that startled the night air, but which, nevertheless, gave vent to a little of my long pent-up feelings, I rushed forward, and throwing myself into her outstretched arms, burst into an uncontrollable fit of sobbing.

Taking me up in her arms, and pressing her cool cheek against mine, all hot and damp, she tried quietly to soothe me, asking questions hurriedly of Sam meanwhile.

"Are you *all* here? What makes you so late? Where is Hero? Wasn't he with you?"

At that moment, as if to answer for himself, the big dog bounded into the circle of light, with a joyful yelp of pleasure at meeting us all again.

In his mouth he held a fragment of dark grey cloth, evidently torn from the cloak of his late antagonist.

How he leaped about, and whined, and wagged his tail ! as though the satisfaction of finding us safely under such good protection was only equalled by his admiration of his own praiseworthy conduct.

"Oh, John, John, is *he* coming after Hero?" cried Harry, with quivering voice, edging close up to the gardener, and taking his hand.

"Is *who* coming?" inquired Miss Royce, hastily.

"Springall Jack, Miss Royce," replied Sam, in a low, grave voice; "we have fallen in with him this evening."

"Then no wonder you are all frightened!" said Miss Royce, anxiously; and then, not troubling Sam with any more questions on the subject just at present, she turned to John, saying,—

"Is he likely to follow the dog, do you think?"

"Not he, Miss! Hero's been quite enough for him, I'll warrant, if he's been tackling him,—as I suppose he have, Ma'am. However, I'd just like to see him come now; for if there's one greater blackgua—, I begs yer pardon, Miss," and John, brandishing a huge, knotted stick, relapsed into a significant silence.

"Let me carry Master Ayres, Miss," he said, presently, as we set off, after the brief pause occasioned by our meeting,—“if you or Master Sam would be so kind as to carry the lantern.”

I raised my lips to her ear. "Oh please, *please*, don't let me ever go out of your arms,—never any more," I whispered, with a choking voice, sealing my entreaty with a moist kiss.

"I'll carry him, John. It isn't far."

My only thanks were to throw my arms round her neck, almost strangling her with a mighty hug.



CHAPTER IX.

"TUB-NIGHT."

By a strange piece of good fortune, Sam's wet clothes were not observed in the general confusion attending our entrance into the house. As soon as the garden gate swung back with a sharp "click" behind us, and the crunching of the gravel sounded crisp beneath our feet, the hall-door was thrown wide open, and Mrs. Royce's dark-robed figure stood out in bold relief against the bright light at her back. Shading her eyes with her hand, she peered anxiously out into the night.

"Jenny! Jenny! Is that you?"

"Yes, Mother—here we are—all safe and sound!"

How pleasant and cheery her voice sounded! and to the mother's anxious ears it must have sounded sweet and comforting, indeed; for she had evidently been in an agitated frame of mind for the past half-hour, such as nothing could allay, save the certain knowledge of the truth, whether the news were good or bad.

She came out to meet us, as we stepped forth into the flood of light streaming through the open doorway, saying, earnestly,—

"Are they all here? What kept them? Has anything happened amiss?"

Then, before Miss Royce could answer, she continued hurriedly, as she caught sight of me,—

“What *is* the matter with him? Tell me, child, is he badly hurt?”

“No, no, Mother. Don’t be alarmed. They are all right, every one of them. I am only carrying Bernie, because he’s tired and frightened, poor boy!”

“Frightened? What at? Why don’t you tell me?”

Seeing that her mother was still in so nervous a state of alarm, I heard Miss Royce whisper, hastily, as she set me gently down upon my feet,—

“They have seen ‘Springall Jack,’ or so they say; but I will tell you all I know about it presently,—we must get them away to bed, at once, now.”

Sam had slipped quietly past Mrs. Royce, and had gone straight off to the shoe-cupboard, and by the time we entered the hall, was busily engaged in pulling off his dirty boots, with his back carefully turned upon us and the light.

However, he need not have feared detection just then, for, for the next few minutes, everything was hurry and excitement. Miss Baxter came running downstairs, to assure herself that we had all been brought home safe and uninjured; whilst over the balusters peered certain rough-haired heads, whose owners’ throats were encircled by those broad, white, bandage-like collars, happily peculiar only to the *nocturnal* attire of the British juvenile,—telling plainly that order for once was banished from the upstairs regions, and unrestrained freedom of action reigning in its stead.

One or two white-robed forms stole stealthily to the foot of the steps, and keeping well within the shadows falling there, maintained so excellent a vantage-ground, until the approach of the enemy compelled them to flee once more to higher quarters.

As I sat on the ground, tugging manfully at my boot, my

heart still palpitating violently from its recent agitation, the array of toes, legs, arms, and heads, protruding through, and over, the dimly lighted staircase in the distance, made me forget my still undried tears, in a quiet chuckle of unrestrained amusement at so odd a sight.

The "Betties," too—as they were popularly styled—were hovering round the kitchen doorway, Anne vainly trying to induce John to make his replies keep pace with her numerous questions ; whilst Ellen busily offered her services to every one at once, pulling off an obstinate boot here, hanging up a cap there, and assisting at the hand-washing, at about the "one down, another come on" rate of doing things.

Sam's clothes, having been so thoroughly dowsed from head to foot, were, luckily, the same tint all over, save for the dark part below the knees, where the mud still clung—but even this, by lamplight, did not show so much as we had feared.

He and Mat slept at this time in a different dormitory to the one in which Harry and I were placed ; so just as we two were turning off to our room, I felt my arm suddenly grasped, and pulling me back, he whispered in my ear,—

"Mind you and Harry keep it all dark about my getting into the water. I shall get up and brush my breeches in the morning, before any of them are about. Then She need never know anything about it ; for, you see, all this about Springall Jack will drive everything else out of every one's head ; and John will never sneak about my boots, if I get him to promise not to."

"All right," I answered, hastily drawing my arm away. "Good night."

And away I sped after Harry and Miss Royce. In my present nervous condition, I dreaded to have to run through even a few yards of the dark corridor, alone.

It was long that night ere the strain upon my nerves relaxed enough to allow me to fall into a troubled slumber ; from

which I awoke every now and again, with a start, or a half-uttered shout, as in my dreams I passed once more through the scenes of the last few hours, their various stirring events mixed confusedly together, and contorted into forms even more alarming than the reality, and scarcely less intensely vivid.

In spite of the Scamp's precaution, the whole story of our adventures came out the next day under Mrs. Royce's close investigation.

Very gravely did she talk to us, as soon as the recital was ended; pointing out to us how blameable our conduct had really been, and assuring us how true it had proved in this case, that disobedience brings its own punishment, often when least expected. To her, it seemed, she said, a special Providence, which had left Hero—apparently by the merest accident—to be our protector, and possibly the rescuer of Sam from a watery grave.

But for Miss Royce's intercession, we should all—particularly the Scamp—have doubtless come in for a dose of the severe sentence which we had been expecting and dreading all the morning.

So eloquently did she plead our cause, however, that her mother was forced to yield to her entreaties, and even to acknowledge that perhaps, after all, we had already suffered sufficient punishment for this first offence; which, moreover, had been one more of thoughtlessness than wilful, intentional, and deliberate commission.

The next day, being Saturday, the usual weekly "tubbing" took place in the evening.

The boys in the playground were finishing up the pleasure of the half-holiday by playing a fine game of "Prisoners' Base," the spirit of which, however, gradually diminished, as, one by one, they had to obey the summons of that inexorable bell, which called them in by turn to take their share in the customary ablutions

At first it did not signify much, for, with one or two exceptions, the departure of the little ones made no perceptible difference to the fun. But by-and-by, when Jack Smedley and Hugh Marshall had to go, the shouts of disappointment grew louder and longer, as the clang of the great bell suddenly cut short some brilliant run, and caused the runner to turn his steps in the direction of the house.

For, while the evening light lasted, and the weather was fine, we were always allowed to stay out of doors until the very last minute before our presence was required within—the only rule being that the call of the bell should be implicitly and immediately obeyed; failing which, the privilege was liable to be withheld from us indefinitely.

This evening it was the Scamp's and my turn to assist at the ceremony within doors, and ever since the first day—when Harry Morland had so glowingly described to me the "sprees" in which he and the Scamp always indulged when engaged together on "tub-nights"—I had looked forward eagerly to the time when we should take our part in the proceedings on the same evening.

But to our mutual disappointment, our hopes were dashed to the ground, just when their fulfilment seemed certain at last; for Mrs. Royce, considering that Sam was still under the ban of her displeasure, would not allow him to undertake, for the present, any office which in any way partook of the nature of a privilege.

So Willie Knowles was called to the post, instead—an arrangement which, after all, pleased me—though in rather a different manner—quite as much as the original one would have done.

Though the weather was still warm, a bright fire burned in the kitchen grate, and on the ground in front of it, with a few feet of drying-room between, stood the great round bath, in which, one by one, we were immersed.

By the time the first of the older boys was summoned, it began to grow rapidly dusk ; so the shutters were closed, the lamps lighted, and, after this short respite, work busily resumed in all its various branches.

First of all came the undressing, which took place under Miss Royce's supervision, who, folding up the clothes into neat bundles, passed on their owners to the tender mercies of Anne, who presided at the bath.

Thence they stepped on to the warm carpet, right in front of the fire, were speedily wrapped in an enormous sheet, and thoroughly dried and toasted, by an energetic old widow of sixty, who came regularly on Saturdays to make herself generally useful, as well as to take charge of this especial department.

This operation completed, over their clean night-shirts was thrown a warm, flannel-lined dressing-gown of Miss Royce's, which, to the great delight of all the youngsters, was so long that it trailed a yard or more behind them upon the floor.

Of course, with this profusion of drapery to manage, it was quite impossible for them to attend to anything else, so, turn by turn, Willie and I conducted each one upstairs and along the corridors, carrying their clothes, and otherwise making ourselves useful.

It was fine fun for me to stay up later than any of the other boys, and to watch the big fellows undergo their "tubbing;" some so calm and matter-of-fact, whilst others, of a more excitable or mischievous turn of mind, jumped in and out, splashing and spattering the drops all around them, or springing up with a startled scream dowsed the water almost over Anne's head as they leapt out, the operation having come to an abrupt conclusion with a sudden shower of cold water from a handy basin close by.

To our mutual delight, it fell to my lot to accompany the Scamp upstairs.

As I came rushing down with the dressing-gown, just discarded from my last charge, and ran quickly in at the kitchen-door, I found him just emerging from under the widow's hands.

We left the room with an ill-suppressed chuckle at our good fortune, and the moment the corner was safely turned, away he sped for the staircase, the dressing-gown floating far away in the air behind him.

I gave chase, but as he took the flight two steps at a time, I was soon outdistanced.

Presently, however, a slipper rattled down the stairs, almost to my feet, succeeded the next moment by its fellow. As I stopped to pick them up, the Scamp sat himself placidly down upon the top step, laughing in a subdued voice as he watched my awkward attempts to hold them, without spilling any of the articles I carried.

By the time I and my burden arrived safely at the top of the staircase, he had risen, and was capering wildly about on the landing, holding the dressing-gown fantastically out at arms'-length, in a way which recalled to my mind the day when Harry Morland and I had been amusing ourselves, in much the same fashion, down in the hall below.

"Oh, I say, Scamp, what would She say if she caught you now? That is the very thing that Harry and I got into such a row for doing."

"'Twas Harry who got into the row,—not you."

"Yes, I know," I replied, meekly, feeling slightly ashamed of myself for having escaped my share of the chastisement. "But then, she threatened that if she—"

"I don't care," interrupted the Scamp, "she won't be coming up here, yet awhile. But never mind; I'll be the 'Queen of Sheba,' and you shall be my servant, holding up my train, and carrying the raiment and fine linen and sandals that I am going to present to Solomon; no one could object to *that*, could they?"

"I should *think* not!" I answered, dubiously. "But I must go down again with the dressing-gown, you know."

"Oh, nonsense! Willie Knowles has not started with Freeman, yet. You catch hold behind, and we'll stalk into the room like this."

Saying which, he whisked one arm out of the sleeve, and brought the robe down under his shoulder, diagonally.

I walked a couple of yards behind, the extremity of the folds held lightly between my fingers, and the rest of the drapery falling in graceful curves between us.

Throwing his head back with a haughty air, the Scamp marched on, thrusting his legs well forward, and pointing his toes gracefully towards the ground at every step. One hand was engaged in carefully grasping his attire, whilst the other was poised high in air, merely, he explained, to lend an additional and elegant effect to the scene.

Flinging the door wide open, he marched gravely into the room in dead silence, paced past the row of beds on the right, and so down the other side to his own. Then, with a dignified air, he let his royal robe fall slowly from his shoulders, and, with a sudden bound, sprung lightly on to his bed; whence, seated cross-legged upon his pillow, he looked calmly around, to see what impression he had created upon the surprised occupants of the room.

The boys, of course, after the first astonished stare at his strange mode of entrance, had, one and all, gone off into a succession of loud titters, upset quite as much by the comical expression on his face, as by his absurd deportment and attire.

Miss Baxter, sitting on Harry Morland's bed, engaged in combing out his thick, curly hair, looked quietly up, watched our stately progress round the room, without attempting to check us, and then, in a clear, low voice said, slowly,—

"Sam, you know very well that *that* is not the way to come into a room, and you should not have induced Bernie to take



"HE MARCHED GRAVELY INTO THE ROOM."

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part in such behaviour. Go out now, and come in again properly."

Some of the boys settled down as though they were expecting to be spectators of a little exciting scene between teacher and pupil.

But they were doomed to disappointment, for Sam got quietly off his bed, and did exactly as he was told, without a moment's hesitation, and with none of that stubborn air of bravado which made many of the boys' unwilling compliance almost as defiant as a flat refusal to obey orders.

It was very difficult for the teachers to be angry with the Scamp. He did everything so coolly, so completely as though he enjoyed a fault merely for the sake of any little amount of fun to be abstracted therefrom, rather than from any desire to "show-off" by daring the authorities, that it was not in their hearts to reprove him, more than was absolutely necessary to preserve harmony and order.

Just as he was once more reseating himself upon the bed, and I was stooping to pick up the fallen dressing-gown, a loud, shrill, piercing shriek was heard in the distance, evidently arising from some one in the downstairs regions.

Every one started, and held his breath to listen.

Another, and another, followed in quick succession. What could it possibly mean?

"It's Rogers!" cried the Scamp, springing up; "what *has* happened?"





CHAPTER X.

PEACE-MAKING.

WITHOUT another word, Sam darted to the ground, and rushing through the doorway, {made swiftly for the kitchen. As he passed, he caught my hand, and pulled me by main force after him. From all the other rooms the white-robed figures of the boys came trooping out, asking, with scared faces, what was the matter. With Miss Baxter after us, and all the boys from that room flocking behind her, we flew down the stairs.

Away went the dressing-gown, which was so hampering my movements, over the balusters, down into the hall below, falling right upon Miss Royce's head, as she came running from the kitchen, completely enveloping her in its voluminous folds ; but no one thought of laughing, as, with a gesture of impatience, and a hurried exclamation of annoyance, she flung it off, and ran on.

"Rogers has—" I heard her say hastily, as she rushed past Miss Baxter upon the stairs, and on through the group of urchins huddled close together on the landing.

In the kitchen every one was crowding round some one lying upon the ground, in the corner where the mangle stood, but for some moments we could neither see nor hear anything to explain the cause of such prodigious excitement.

There was no shrieking now, only a low, dull moaning, from

some one evidently in pain ; and peeping through a break in the crowd, I caught sight of Rogers' face, turned deadly pale, his eyes fast closed, and his tongue protruding from between his half-shut lips.

" Yes. It is Rogers ; he has mangled his fingers, awfully ! " said Willie Knowles at last, after we had made many unsuccessful attempts to induce some one or other to attend to our excited inquiries.

But before he could add anything further, the ranks opened, and Miss Royce knelt hastily down beside the prostrate body. She had returned with several bottles in her hand, and was soon anxiously discussing their application with Mrs. Royce and the widow. Handing the remedies over to her mother, she rose the next minute, and catching sight of Willie Knowles, called to him.

" Willie, I want you to run off at once for Dr. Payne."

Then, looking round, she added, " You will not care to go alone, perhaps, so you will have to take Bernard with you ; there is no one else dressed. It is not very far, and you will run faster than Ellen and Anne would ; shall you mind going ? "

" Oh no, Miss Royce," replied Willie, promptly, without consulting me. And he drew me along with him to pull on our discarded boots again.

Truly it was a curious scene ; the effect would have been absolutely ridiculous had it not been of so painful a nature.

A knot of boys crowding eagerly round, in their clean, white night-shirts ; two in various stages of preparation for the bath ; Johnnie Freeman enveloped in a flowing dressing-gown ; and Johnnie Harris capering wildly about, on the outskirts of the crowd, stark naked, just as he had been left, when the first agonized scream had been uttered, which had immediately attracted every one from their work to the scene of the unfortunate accident.

As we set off, I heard Miss Royce clearing the boys out of the kitchen, and packing them off to bed again.

With this all-absorbing topic on our minds, we reached the doctor's house, with scarcely a thought as to any possibility of another encounter such as I and my companions had experienced on the previous evening. Besides, my admiration of Willie Knowles knew scarcely any bounds, and, with my hand held tight in his, I felt almost as safe as though I were under the protection of any grown-up person.

By the time we reached the school once more, Rogers had been removed, with some difficulty, to his bed, and now lay in a state of semi-unconsciousness, which made Mrs. Royce very anxious for our return.

"Without any one noticing," she said to Dr. Payne, "he stole over to play with the mangle—which he knew, perfectly well, was strictly forbidden—and setting the machine in motion, contrived, in some mysterious and inexplicable manner, to catch his fingers between the side cog-wheels; which, of course, must have crushed them fearfully at once, before the turn of the wheel could have possibly released them. The bone of one seems to be completely smashed, and I am afraid the other is very seriously injured."

"I will go up and see the little patient, at once," returned the doctor, cheerfully; "I very much hope the case is less serious than you imagine, Mrs. Royce."

We, meanwhile, were hurried off to bed as fast as possible by Miss Royce, who had succeeded, during our absence, in appeasing public curiosity, and once more restoring order and quiet throughout the house.

Rogers was obliged to keep his bed for two or three days after, and for some weeks went about with his hand wrapped carefully up in bandages, and, at first, bound up in a sling in addition. Fortunately, he had maimed his left hand, so that he was not so completely helpless as he might have been.

All of us were sorry for his misfortune, and yet, down in our heart of hearts, a feeling of quiet satisfaction at his temporary absence, lurked secretly:—at any rate amongst some of us younger and smaller boys.

I had not yet forgotten that Sunday-afternoon's dream of mine, related a few chapters back; and though the first realistic freshness had worn off, I still felt the same ardent desire to become a member of that happy band which I had seen and heard in my vision,—to join whose ranks the conditions required that each one should first become a "peace-maker," in order to be called a "child of God."

Hitherto, this barrier had seemed an insuperable difficulty, in my case; but, perhaps, now, there was an opportunity afforded by Rogers' illness, which might partially remove the obstacle from my path. Should I avail myself of it?

With this idea running forcibly through my mind, I begged leave, the following afternoon, to be allowed to sit with Rogers awhile—a request which was very readily granted.

Feeling, nevertheless, anything but confident of a cordial reception, I walked slowly upstairs and along the passages, slackening my pace as I gradually drew nearer to my destination, unable to make up my mind how to enter, or what to say.

At the door I came to a dead halt. Should I not turn back, after all? He would not care to have *me* to sit with him; he would only laugh in my face, and tell me to go away, and not to come there bothering him.

But then, no one else, apparently, intended to volunteer to visit him, and, perhaps, if it were very dull in there, even *I* might be better than nobody.

Still, how much nicer it was to be out of doors with the other boys! and there, through the passage window, I could see the Scamp and Harry, lying in a corner of the lawn by themselves, playing with the white mice, which they had brought out for a half-hour's airing, before it was necessary to

commence learning their Scripture lesson. At that moment a dull moan of pain caught my ear, causing me to think once more of the sufferer within.

How dull it must be, lying there, alone, with the double row of little white beds, and nothing to relieve the monotony of the bare walls, but the great sprawling pattern of the faded wall-paper. Just one more lingering look of regret through the window, as I placed my hand, hesitatingly, on the brass door-handle.

Ah! stay! There is Willie Knowles going to join the other two; now, indeed, I *must* go.

With which resolution, I suddenly withdrew my hand from the door-handle, turning it, as I did so, with a sharp, unintentional jerk.

"Who's there?" cried a voice from within.

Should I reply? Or should I noiselessly make my escape?

"Come in, do!" cried Rogers, again; peevishly this time, I thought.

So there was no help for it, and in I marched.

"Oh, it's *you*, is it? And what do *you* want, pray? Why doesn't Bob North, or some one, come to see me?"

Rogers' disappointed tone, as he sank back again upon his pillows, so damped my spirits, that, with a fresh desire to effect a retreat, I racked my brains to invent an excuse for only remaining in the room a few minutes.

"Why, Bob is at home to-day, you know; this is Sunday."

"So it is. And it was only last night that I did this!"—and his voice died away in an almost inaudible murmur at his misfortune;—"I seem to have been lying here for days, already."

"Do you? I am so sorry."

"*You—sorry?* I know better! You are all glad enough to have me out of the way for a bit, I know," he said, bitterly.

I did not make any reply, for his words had so nearly hit

the truth that I could think of nothing suitable with which to answer him. Presently he spoke again.

"Now you *are* here, you may as well stop a bit with me. It's awfully slow, lying here with nothing to look at but that rickety old washstand, or the flies crawling up the window panes, and slipping down again faster than they get up."

"I came for that," I said, shyly. "Would you *really* like me to stay with you?"

"Shouldn't ask you if I didn't," was the curt rejoinder.

But I knew Rogers' ways pretty well by this time, and not to have met with an uncivil rebuff was an evidence of a new and strange feeling of kindness towards me on his part.

"I am afraid I cannot read well enough for you to care about my reading any book aloud," I said, despondingly.

"Oh, never mind the reading! I have been looking through those books all the morning, until I am sick of the sight of every one of them."

"But hasn't Miss Baxter been sitting with you, then?"

"Not since dinner-time: she has had quite enough of my company for one day, I'll warrant!"

Then, with a sudden, sharp cry of pain, he sank back upon his pillow, his eyes shut and his lips pressed tightly together.

Frightened, and yet not daring to offer a word of sympathy, I stood watching him. Presently he reopened his eyes, and stared fixedly at his tied-up hand, without speaking.

"Does it hurt *dreadfully*?" I ventured to ask, timidly, but he vouchsafed no reply; so, seating myself upon a bed hard by, I waited patiently until he should choose to express some knowledge of my presence.

"What made you come?" he asked, by-and-by, without raising his eyes, in a voice which seemed to indicate that he was following out a certain train of thought.

"Oh! I don't know," I replied, rather puzzled how to answer; "I thought perhaps you might like to see some one."

"Yes? But then, *you*; I've always been such a brute to *you*."

"Not more than to some of the others," was the rejoinder on the tip of my tongue; but, fortunately, I checked myself just in time.

He lay still again, and neither of us spoke, until he continued, with an apparent effort,—

"I am sorry that I sneaked of you and Harry Morland, that day."

I knew to what he alluded, well enough; but I don't think that I could have understood, then, how much such an admission must have cost him. Yet I was glad, now, that I had come in, and only regretted that my visit had not, in the end, been more of a voluntary character, and less the result of an accident.

"Oh! that was long ago!" I said, trying to laugh the matter off. "We have almost forgotten that by this time."

And then, feeling awkward and shy, at the revival of so delicate a topic, I launched forth headlong into a fresh subject, with a bravery born of my very timidity—if such an apparent contradiction of terms can be justly reconciled.

"I tell you what!" said Rogers, as the tea-bell rang, and I rose to go downstairs, "I'll never be such a brute to you, again, as I have been; you're a regular little brick, that you are! And you'll come and see me again soon, won't you, eh?"

"All right!" I nodded, and with a bright face and a light heart, I slipped out of the room, and ran down the stairs two steps at a time, in spite of the difficulty which such a performance presented to my short legs.

"Really I can scarcely believe that I should ever have liked Rogers half so well," I thought, as I fell into the line which was already filing into the dining-room for tea. "The time seems to have slipped quite quickly and pleasantly away; perhaps, after all, I shall grow to be a 'peacemaker'—in time."



CHAPTER XI.

THE SCAMP TURNS SPY.

"BERNIE," whispered the Scamp to me, just as we were passing in to tea, two or three days afterwards, "come up into the Nut Walk, as soon as ever we are let out after tea ; I want to speak to you about something private."

"All right, Sam ; I'll come !" I whispered back, wondering, meanwhile, what on earth the Scamp could have to tell me.

So, in half an hour, running hastily to the appointed meeting-place, I discovered the Scamp eagerly conversing with Harry Morland.

"Are you willing to join in a spree to-night?" he said, breaking off in the midst of a sentence, and advancing to meet me.

"What is it?" I asked, cautiously.

"Come here !" he said, taking my hand ; and leading me to the hedge at the end of the path, he pointed, through a gap in the shrubs, to a low building a short distance off.

"Do you see that shed, away down there?"

I nodded.

"That is Ryland's place, where he keeps those wretched donkeys of his."

"Do you mean the 'Lanky Man,' who lives at the corner of the two lanes?"

"That's him!" said the Scamp, ungrammatically—though we were profoundly unconscious of the fact.

"Well; and what then?"

"Why, that's where we are going to."

"We—who?"

"Harry, and you, and I."

"I never said I should; what's the object?"

"Oh, but you will, won't you?" said the Scamp, persuasively, but ignoring my question. "I want you to go, ever so.—Besides, you wouldn't be a little funk, would you?"

"No-o-o," I answered, dubiously, for scarcely any one likes being called a coward. "But what would She do to us, if we were to get found out?"

It was a low standard on which to base the motives of one's actions, but it is almost invariably the first idea which, in some shape or form, suggests itself to the mind of the schoolboy, deliberately contemplating some forbidden adventure, and anxious to calculate all risks.

"Oh, no fear! We shan't be caught; so come along, both of you."

"But what is the use?" I said, still hesitating.

"I'll tell you when we are there."

So, over-persuaded (alas! what a common failing that is—of following so easily where others lead), I plucked up courage, and pushed after the other two, through the gap in the hedge, and so out into the fields beyond.

We skirted the edge of this one, keeping well under the shelter of the high hedges, over the rickety gate, into the narrow lane, which, losing itself in the fields just above, was scarcely ever used, and was, consequently, in a deplorable condition of deep-worn ruts and hollow places, where the water lay in yellow, muddy puddles for weeks together in rainy weather.

Then we ran down this lane for some way, until the Scamp suddenly pulled up short, telling us to stop too.

"This way, boys!" he said, pushing open a gate leading into a small paddock, containing a large number of apple-trees.

"Had the Scamp brought us here to steal apples?" I thought to myself, as I looked up at the boughs, bending low under their burden of bright golden and red fruit. Impossible! for though, only lately, we had been reading aloud a tale of school-life, in which the hero had deliberately headed a band of boys determined to rob a neighbouring orchard, I did not believe the Scamp could be guilty of copying such an unworthy example, wild as he was. Besides, he knew that apples offered no special temptation to me, and therefore, if such had been his intention, he was scarcely likely to have proposed me as one of his accomplices.

Yet, though I almost hated myself for harbouring even a suspicion of such a nature against my friend, I could not prevent the thought passing through my mind, particularly as I could divine no other possible reason for such queer conduct.

"Now follow me close, make no noise, and don't talk, whatever else you do!" he said, leading us away from the trees, straight towards the wooden shed; so, obviously, my fear had been a groundless one.

Every now and then he stopped to listen, holding up his hand with an air of warning, if either of us chanced to crack a dead twig beneath our feet, or incautiously kicked away a loose stone.

At length we were close underneath the building, waiting patiently, while the Scamp peered anxiously through the chinks between the boards, to satisfy himself, apparently, that the shed was empty.

"All right!" he said, beckoning to us over his shoulder. "Come along."

And squashing between the shed and the hedge against which

it was erected, we were soon completely hidden by the growth of underwood, springing up so thickly from the dry ditch over which we crouched.

"What *have* you brought us here for, and what are we to do now?" I asked, pulling out a thorn which had stuck into my finger—fortunately not deeply—during our passage through the bushes.

"You'll see, most likely. You must each get where there's a hole that you can see through, and mind you don't call out, *whatever* happens; because we are safe enough, here, if you don't either of you make a sound. No one can possibly see us, it's so thick; but there is a gap a bit further down that we can run for, if it should be necessary to slope—which it won't be, if you both keep perfectly quiet."

I felt dimly alarmed at all this possibility of something exciting happening, but apparently Harry did not share my apprehensions, for, after taking a deliberate survey through a tiny hole, he said, coolly, "Why, there's nothing in there but a heap of rubbish, and a couple of donkeys, and carts, and all that sort of thing."

"You wait and see!" replied the Scamp, mysteriously.

So we sat patiently on, most of the time in perfect silence, for what seemed to me like an hour. In reality, I daresay, it was considerably under twenty minutes.

Then the sudden sound of dead leaves and dry brambles, crunching under the tread of heavy footsteps, made my heart leap into my mouth, for the sounds were close at hand.

"He's coming!" cried the Scamp, excitedly, under his breath. "Don't stir, for the life of you!"

It was Rylands who entered; the "Lanky Man," as we used always to call him—an unusually tall and thin man, "all arms and legs," as the Scamp used often to say of Willie Knowles.

He was apparently middle-aged, though possibly his grizzly grey hair and deep-set eyes may have made him look older

than he really was; his hollow cheeks, too, were grimy with coal dust, for amongst the variety of uses to which his ill-kept, hardly-used animals were put, was that of dragging heavy cart-loads of coal from door to door, amongst the villages scattered around.

The half-starved donkeys instinctively shrunk away from him as they saw him enter, turning their meek, suffering-looking eyes upon him, as though they would have besought him to spare them, for once, the torture of the customary dig-in-the-ribs from the short, sharp stick he carried, with which he usually saluted them as he passed.

Strange to say, their dumb request was, at any rate, partially answered this evening, for he merely picked up a dry clod of earth, and flung it carelessly at them, causing them to trot doggedly off to the other end of the shed, where they huddled close together again, waiting, with quiet, patient fear, the result of his next movement.

Just now, however, he seemed to be intent upon some other sport than that of cruelly worrying his hapless dependents, and, with a half-muttered oath, he strode on, until he came so close to where I was sitting, watching, in a state of nervous agitation lest we should be discovered, that I expect I should have heedlessly proclaimed our presence by a sudden cry of alarm, had not my very fear almost restrained the use of my faculties.

It was so strange, so weird! The gloom of the building, the forbidding, scaring aspect of the man, and his coarse behaviour, as well as the bitter knowledge that we were doing wrong in thus being "out of bounds" at all, and trespassers too, moreover, all combined to work me up to the highest pitch of fear and excitement.

Still I watched on at my hole, never daring to move a muscle, though my limbs were aching all over from the strain of preserving, for so long a time, the same position.

Rylands at once proceeded to pull away a portion of a stack

of fagots, piled unsuspectingly against the opposite side of the shed, leaving exposed, as he did so, a large square board, to which was attached, by way of a handle, a long loop of stout iron wire.

Stooping down, he lifted this away, and from the cavity beneath, pulled forth some long, black objects, not very easily distinguishable in this dim light.

A faint perception of the Scamp's mysterious design in bringing us to this odd place, now gradually dawned across my brain, making me shudder with an agony of dread, as the light broke slowly in upon my mind.

A sudden, irresistible cry rose to my lips, but happily died away again, before its utterance had hurled us abruptly into an unknown, terrible danger. A desire to cry, rather than an actual sound ; a gasping, catching breath, such as wakes one sometimes, startled and afraid—one knows not why—from a restless, disturbed slumber.

Only how could Sam have had any clue to this solution of the dreaded mystery ?

But this was no place for questioning him, and, in the meantime, I could scarcely feel more shocked and bewildered, by any fresh revelations, than I did at that moment, when I instinctively knew myself to be for the second time—nay for the fiftieth, more probably, but wholly unconscious of the fact—in the awful presence of "Springall Jack."

Yes ! there are his boots ! for now he is pulling them on, muttering to himself the while ; and in another minute he will be upon his feet once more, equipped in those instruments of such terrible torture to the nervous and the weak.

A horrid thought flashed through my brain.

What if he were intending to practise leaping the very hedge under which we were seated ?

But no. He would scarcely dare to hazard an experiment so dangerous to his own safety, in broad daylight, even



"HE SPRANG HIGH INTO THE AIR."

in so unfrequented, out-of-the-way a spot as this lonely by-lane.

He had risen to his feet now, towering there to much over six feet, in those high, spring-heeled boots of his.

Then, with a sudden bound, he sprang high into the air, descending close to the two terrified donkeys, who, with a sprightlier movement than before, rushed helter-skelter to the spot which their master had just vacated.

But ere they were half way across, he had turned, and, with marvellous agility, was once more springing through the air, this time right over the backs of the affrighted animals, who, in their bewilderment, now stood stock still close together, their heads touching, and their noses close upon the ground.

With a hoarse, chuckling kind of laugh, he continued his exertions for two or three more flights, until, apparently satisfied with his practice, he slowly removed his boots, and placed them once more in concealment, covering everything up as before.

Then he rushed upon the awe-struck donkeys, hitched them in a trice into one of the rickety carts, and opening the doors wide, belaboured them unmercifully as he drove them across the field to the cottage.

When the "click" of the gate reached us, as it swung back after they had all passed through—and not until then—we breathed freely once more, as we looked at each other in unbroken silence.

The Scamp, I fancy, was too much pleased with the success of his scheme to have thought much of fear, but Harry and I were in such a condition of suppressed agitation and alarm, that *my* knees, at any rate, knocked tremblingly together, as I scrambled after the others through the hedge, and our words came stammeringly forth as we scampered home, discussing the exciting adventure as we ran.

"How *did* you find out, Scamp?"

"And why didn't you tell us beforehand?"

"Because I wasn't at all sure. It was only from something funny that the Lanky Man said to me this morning, that I began to suspect. I was coming home from the village, after sending that telegram off for Mrs. Royce, you know; and he stopped me, and asked me a lot of questions about our having seen Springall Jack the other night. I thought it was rather queer to ask so much about it now, because he has seen us lots of times since, and never said anything about it; and I told him so, too. Then he said the news had only reached him a day or two ago, and that he hadn't seen any of us passing since, unless in the company of one of the teachers. I said it was odd that he should have heard of it so long after, seeing he lived so near to us, for I had been told that it was all over the whole village the very next day."

At this length of time after, the incident of our encounter seemed to have taken quite a new form; its terrors were, if not actually forgotten, at any rate greatly overshadowed by the romantic importance which the event had attached to us; and the unusual interest manifested by every one to hear a full, true, and particular account of the adventure from an eye-witness, had raised our self-esteem to such a pitch that we had come to regard ourselves in the light of so many small heroes, unmindful of the fact that we had really had no hand in bringing the exciting scene about, but had rather been the unwilling victims of a cruel and heartless so-called "practical joke."

But at this fresh assurance from the Scamp of the notoriety to which we had been suddenly raised by this means, Harry and I assented to the truth of his remark with an enthusiasm which showed that, long ere this, the recollection of our past troubles had been more than compensated for by the glory of our present renown.

As soon as this short interruption was over, the Scamp proceeded.

"Well, I told him, then, that I was one of the very four who had seen Springall Jack, and he gave such a tremendous jump, when I said that, that I looked up at him quite surprised. And it was just that very movement that put me on the scent, for, as I looked up, it flashed through my mind all of a sudden, so that I began to call out something that I might have been sorry for afterwards.

"Fortunately, I didn't get very far before I remembered, and checked myself just in time. But for all that, I think he must have had some faint suspicion, for almost directly he told me that he had just come out of that shed, where he had been trying to see whether he could jump at all, and he didn't believe he could get over two feet, even if it were to save his life."

The Scamp stopped, and burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, as the recollection of this undeceiving ruse rose in his memory again.

"He must have thought me a dufferish little innocent, to be taken in like that!" he continued, as soon as he could command his voice once more. "But he made a slight mistake, for once in his life, if he did; for I'm sharp enough to be one too many for *him*, 'though it's I says it as shouldn't'!"

"I expect," interrupted Harry, with a merry twinkle in his eye, "I expect he thought where he saw such fine carrots growing, that the head was safe to be green!"

Harry started off at this brilliant sally, laughing heartily at his own jest, but though I joined in too, Sam was too much occupied with the thoughts of his successful scheme to trouble to pursue the offender, as he doubtless would have done under ordinary circumstances.

"I never expected to have caught him at it the very first time," he said, and Harry came meekly back to listen; "I thought we should have to go and watch ever so long, and several times, even if I were not altogether mistaken."

So the Scamp rattled on, for he was evidently in the wildest

spirits, thanks to such an unexpectedly successful ending to his scheme; we joining in, every now and then, with eager questions or remarks.

"Why had he asked *us* to go? Why had not Mat been invited too?"

"Well, you see," he replied, gravely, "it wouldn't have done to take any one who had not seen him before, and then Mat, though he is very nice and good-natured—well, I don't believe he would have come! He's too good; that's why I didn't ask him."

"Is it so *very* awful to go down to Rylands, then?" I asked, guiltily afraid of the consequences which would attend the discovery of our disobedience.

"It's about the most awful thing you can do here—to go out of bounds without leave!" said the Scamp, turning round and standing stock-still as he stared into my scared face. "So mind you don't breathe a word about it to any one, not even to Mat, or Willie Knowles either."

"Very well," I answered, faintly. If I had known beforehand to what an extent we were going to transgress, I should have hesitated, more than I did, about setting out upon this expedition, fraught with so much peril, and attended by the haunting fear of such tremendous consequences.





CHAPTER XII.

RAILROADS AND ROYALTY.

"AH! I'm a smart child, I am!" exclaimed the Scamp, laughing complacently, as he scrambled up the bank and through the hedge into the Nut Walk once more.

Then he turned to give Harry a hand, and as I clung on to Harry's coat behind, we were soon all three safely within bounds again, and busily occupied in doing up the gap in the hedge so as to make it appear, if not actually smaller, at any rate no larger than it did an hour ago, before our three bodies had squeezed successively through.

"Hark! there is some one calling!" cried Harry, as we emerged, at last, upon the more frequented paths.

"Is there?" I exclaimed, hurriedly, "do you think they've found us out?"

"No, no, don't be so silly!" said Sam, impatiently; "I don't suppose it is for any of us; the others can't have gone indoors yet, I should think. Listen!"

"Bernie, Bernard Ayres, you are wanted!" came floating across the garden towards us, as we stood motionless to catch the words.

"There!" I said, with just a suspicion of triumph in my tone, though my heart seemed to rise to my mouth as I turned an appalled look upon the Scamp.

Without noticing my troubled face, and quite ignoring my little air of self-congratulation at having divined the reasons of the shouts so soon, even though they foreboded doom to us, he bawled back, as the voice came nearer and nearer,—

“He’s up here, Mat; what do you want him for?”

“I couldn’t find you anywhere; where *have* you been hiding?”

The Scamp turned a warning look in my direction, cutting my words short abruptly as he said with affected carelessness,—

“Oh, we have just been mooning about in these parts, lately. We only heard you bawling a few seconds ago.”

“Well, come along, now you *are* found,” said Mat, seizing my hand and dragging me forward towards the house.

In a paroxysm of fear, never dreaming but that my forebodings had come true, and that he was leading me down to undergo the reward of my discovered crime, I wrenched my hand away with a quick, angry jerk, and a cry of excited wrath rose to my lips and trembled there, ready to dissolve upon given notice into a storm of petulant grief.

“Why, what on earth is the matter? Whatever have I done? I’m sure I could not have hurt you!” cried Mat, surprised beyond all measure, as he saw the hot tears filling my eyes.

“What’s he wanted for, Mat; why can’t you tell us when you’re asked?” said the Scamp, authoritatively, as he stepped up to Mat, who was still standing staring with blank amazement at my sudden, inexplicable outburst.

“Why, I’m sure I meant no harm,” he said, greatly crest-fallen. “Mrs. Hughes is here, and wants to see him, and she can’t stay long, she says, and I’m sure I thought it would be a nice surprise for him,” and Mat’s trembling voice seemed to proclaim that he was on the verge of keeping me company in the matter of moist eyes.

I brightened up at this news. After all, then, our adventure

was still our own secret, and it was only a guilty conscience that had imagined the fulfilment of its fears.

"Cut along then, youngster!" Sam said, cheerfully, for he, too, was evidently relieved by this explanation of my summons; and then, dragging me momentarily back as I passed him, he added in an undertone, "and mind you keep it all dark!"

"Why," said Mrs. Hughes, kindly, after the first greetings had been duly exchanged, "you seem quite nervous and shy this evening. Have you not yet recovered from the effects of Springall Jack's apparition?"

"Not quite, yet," I answered low, feeling guiltily conscious that my reply was a vast deal nearer the literal truth than my interrogator imagined.

Fortunately, Mrs. Royce quietly hinted, in a whispered "aside," that it might be more prudent not to revive a scene of which the recollection was still so painful; so that by-and-by my cheeks grew less hot and scarlet, and I was able to take my part in the conversation, without fearing a renewal of the dangerous topic.

"The Scamp says he *may* tell the bobbies about it," said Harry, confidentially whispering in my ear, as we got into bed that night, "and then, you know, we shall have to appear as witnesses!"

"Oh my!" I exclaimed, horror-stricken—"not *really*! You don't think he will *really*, do you? Oh! I do hope not."

And as I lay tossing wearily about, unable to sleep for the thoughts that came crowding into my head, the picture of my speedy appearance before such judges as those awful-looking persons in scarlet robes and long, curly, flowing wigs, whose portraits adorned the school-room walls, rose in my mind, and so filled me with terror, that tears came welling to my eyes, gathered gradually under the tight-closed lids, and squeezing slowly through, trickled down my cheeks upon the pillow, through the darkness and the silence of the night.

A week rolled swiftly by, and, to our infinite relief, the Scamp had announced to us his decision that he had resolved *not* to inform the police of our discovery; still, we were to preserve implicit silence, and keep our own counsel on the subject.

So for the last few days, things had returned to a condition of such calmness, that we might have almost forgotten that we were possessors of so important a secret, had it not formed the theme of our private conversation, whenever either two of us contrived to obtain a few minutes alone together in which to discuss the all-absorbing subject.

This afternoon, however, every one had turned out to take part in a great undertaking which had been in gradual process of formation in our minds for some time past. This was nothing more nor less than the construction, round the playground, of a miniature, artificial railway.

We had grown tired of continually playing "horses," and just when the excitement of some new amusement was required, this fresh form was suddenly suggested to Willie Knowles, by his happening to see me exhibiting a clock-work model of an engine and carriages to Rogers, one day, just as he was passing the open bed-room door.

The idea found favour with the boys at once, and only the official sanction was required before a commencement could be made.

And now Mrs. Royce, having surveyed the site, and duly satisfied herself that nothing was likely to be injured by the proposed works, had given us leave to commence operations on this Wednesday half-holiday.

The railway line along the valley to Brookford had only been opened about a year previously, and most of the boys, remembering the proceedings which enlivened the commencement of that undertaking, were determined to carry out the present affair with a similar ceremony to that which they had

then witnessed—only that the imitation was to be modelled on a grander basis than the original.

So, for some few days past, Willie Knowles, Johnnie Harris, Bob North, and Mat, having been appointed "Committee of Management" by this new "company," had been busily engaged in making all necessary arrangements for the proper conducting of the opening ceremony, and the reception of the "Princess of Brookford;" for Miss Royce had been prevailed upon to join in the forthcoming festival, and to assume, for the time being, the rank and title of a royal princess.

Accordingly, just as the clock struck two, Jack Smedley's carriage and four dashed round to the front door, the Scamp, of course, being one of the "leaders" in his team of bipeds.

As they pulled up at the porch, and the horses pranced and began to paw the ground, the sudden swing-to of the gate made every one—horses and all—look round inquiringly.

"Oh! you have just come in time!" cried Miss Royce, laughing gaily, as Mrs. Hughes and Mary came rapidly up the drive. "Don't be alarmed at my extraordinary appearance! There are grand doings here to-day, and I—'by general desire'—am transformed into a mighty princess for the occasion."

"Yes—I know all about it," returned Mrs. Hughes, smiling and amused. "Bernie, here, told us what was going to take place, when we called the other evening, and Mary has been in quite a state of excitement ever since, for nothing would satisfy her short of my promising to bring her as a spectator; I knew you would have no objection."

"Oh, dear no! I am so glad you have come. It was very stupid of me not to have given you a formal invitation, but indeed it never crossed my mind, until I saw you coming in at the gate just this moment. Mother has gone into the village; and I am afraid the boys are impatient to be off, so would you mind joining us at once?"

"Not at all. We will walk on up to the scene of the cere-

mony, and secure good places for a view of the proceedings," said Mrs. Hughes, whilst Mary pulled her dress impatiently, as a sign of her desire to be off.

"Oh! no! no!" shouted several voices at once. "You must ride up in the carriage with the rest, Mrs. Hughes."

"No, thank you, my boys!" returned she, shaking her head. "See what hard work the horses would have to drag an old, stiff body like me up the hill! Besides, there will scarcely be room enough, as it is, for the two princesses, and their robes, and train-bearers."

"We will very soon make more room; it is only a case of tying on more reins."

"Or stay!" cried Johnnie Harris. "Supposing we make another carriage and pair; there are quite enough of us for that, and everything else as well."

"Yes, that will be best," Jack Smedley nodded.

"Then Mrs. Hughes must be the Princess," said Miss Royce; "I will take off my robe and crown, and hand them over to her," and she laughed merrily.

"I shall not hear of it!" replied Mrs. Hughes, gaily, but so decisively that the matter was settled at once. "I will be your 'lady-in-waiting;' only, you see, I have no grand state dress to wear."

"I can soon remedy that; if you don't mind putting on two or three bright things—just to please the boys, you know."

"And what am I to be then?" asked Mary, wistfully, looking appealingly from one to another.

"I know!" cried the Scamp, clapping his hands. "You shall be Bill Knowles' wife—the 'Lady Mayoress,' don't you know?"

The little girl looked delighted, and the Scamp, taking the wooden bit from between his teeth, held out his hand to her, saying,—

"Come along! I'll run up to the playground with you, whilst

they are dressing; then I can explain to them how it is that we are behind time."

"But can't *I* dress up, too?" asked Mary, anxiously.

"Of course you can!" replied Miss Royce, kindly. "What a shame of me not to have thought of it before, wasn't it? Well, never mind; we will soon find you a couple of shawls and a feather."

At last everything was ready, and every one fully prepared for the start.

The ladies soon reappeared in the doorway, laughing heartily at themselves and each other, for all were gorgeously arrayed in bright-coloured shawls and wraps, and showy ornaments.

On her head Miss Royce wore a conspicuous gilt crown, successfully manufactured by Mat, after a vast amount of praiseworthy care and patience on his part; a long, white feather falling from the back of it down almost to her shoulders.

The other two ladies had contented themselves with two or three brilliant feathers, and a string or two of gaudy but effective beads by way of headdress, for Mat had not had either time or energy to devote to the manufacture of more than one crown.

Miss Royce was further distinguished and adorned by a bright red shawl, which, fastened by a brooch on either shoulder, fell thence in a long, elegant sweep far behind her, where it was pompously supported by Willie Robson and myself, who had been appointed royal train-bearers.

At the head of the procession ran two or three boys, fluttering their red and white handkerchiefs high in the air, at the end of the long, thin sticks they carried.

Next came the carriage and pair, driven by Freeman, containing Mrs. Hughes, Charlie Matthews, and Hugh Marshall, bearing in their hands, the one a long white wand, the other the drawing-room poker, which, regardless of the fact that the

royal and illustrious visitor was *not* Her Majesty, was borne aloft in triumph as the regal sceptre.

The driver of the state carriage evidently had some difficulty in curbing the spirits of his four steeds; for, instead of being duly impressed with the importance of the royal and noble occupants at their heels, they pranced, kicked, and shied, and almost threatened to run away, once,—with princesses, pages, and all.

Arrived at the entrance to the playground, the royal carriage pulled up in front of a small group clustered round the gateway, heads being bared immediately on the approach of the illustrious visitors.

Then, with just the slightest air of hesitation, out stepped Willie Knowles from the ranks of the little throng, and leaning with an affected grace upon his arm, walked pretty Mary Hughes.

She evidently entered heartily into the spirit of the scene, for having contrived to borrow a bright blue silk dress of Miss Baxter's, she had managed, somehow or other, to adapt its superfluous proportions to her diminutive stature, and was now endeavouring to suit her actions and demeanour to the dignified length of her skirts, which trailed so far behind her.

This little piece of natural acting—if so apparent a contradiction of terms be permissible—was irresistibly charming, though slightly comical, nevertheless; for, in the struggle to hold up her robe elegantly and becomingly, and at the same time to maintain her grasp upon a large bouquet she carried, without forgetting to rest lightly upon her lord's arm, her face wore a strange expression of earnestness and wistful anxiety that seemed to amuse her mother vastly.

Within a foot or two of Miss Royce they simultaneously halted, and Willie, placing his right hand upon his heart, made a profound obeisance, his retainers and supporters in the background following suit.

Then, with rather an unsteady voice, he began his welcoming speech, which had been made up and learnt by heart beforehand. Still, though the words were so few, we half dreaded lest in the excitement of the moment his memory might let them slip, and standing just out of sight of the Princess, I noticed that Mat was eagerly following each syllable, upon the little slip of paper he held in one hand.

"We, the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, the nobility, aristocracy, and gentry of our land, the Lords, Commons, and citizens of this noble and honourable city, do humbly and gratefully bid your Royal Highness a most hearty welcome. In the name of Lady Knowles and myself, we beg your acceptance of this bouquet."

Mary stepped shyly forward, and without a word, but with a low, sweeping courtesy, held out the bunch of flowers, which had been suddenly thought of, and collected, at the last moment, from some of the boys' gardens, and which her Royal Highness accepted with a kind smile and a simple "Thank you, my Lady."

It was rather a poor offering, certainly, and I thought I heard the Scamp give vent to his feelings pretty decidedly; at any rate, *some one* said scornfully, "What a thing!" with an indignant snort which sounded very much like one of Sam's contemptuous outbursts.

An awkward pause ensued; every one waiting to know what would come next.

"Why," cried the Scamp, in an undignified 'aside,' "you ought to ask 'em to ride up with you, Miss Royce."

"Oh, very well," said Miss Royce, highly amused, and indeed we all laughed at this abrupt descent to every-day manners, "only I should scarcely have imagined that it was court etiquette to do so."

"Hang etiquette!" the Scamp muttered beneath his breath, as he replaced the bit between his teeth; whilst Willie Knowles

called out, "We ought to have had carriages ourselves, and joined on to the procession."

But it was too late for that now, and so in another minute the Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress were squashed in between us train-bearers and our coachman, Jack Smedley ; whilst the rest of the suite squeezed into the first carriage, or ran on ahead with our outriders.

At the site, every one alighted, Miss Royce and her attendants standing upon an old piece of carpet specially laid down for the royal party.

Every one gathered round, even the horses merged into the crowd, and for the time being appeared on the scene as courtiers or subjects.

Willie Knowles, with Mary still clinging to his arm, and Mat Davis standing by his side, then produced a sheet of paper, and clearing his throat rather nervously, began to read his speech in a slow, deliberate voice, which was supposed to be sufficiently impressive to attract all wavering attention to the matter in hand. This is what he read :—

"To Her Royal Highness the Princess of Brookford.

"May it please your Royal Highness : We have this day to thank you very heartily and humbly for the exceeding honour you have done us, in that you have so graciously consented to be present on the auspicious occasion of this initiatory ceremony in the construction of the first line of railway which has ever traversed the domains of your royal and illustrious Mother.

"We pray your acceptance of this silver trowel, with which to turn the first sod, and we beg that you will do us the honour to retain the same, as a lasting memento of an event which will ever be treasured in the hearts of those who address you, whilst memory lasts.

"That we may long continue to live under your most mild and merciful authority, is ever the constant and heartfelt

petition of your loyal and faithful subjects gathered before you this day."

Willie drew quite a long breath of relief, when at last he arrived safely at the conclusion of the address. It had cost him and Mat no end of time and trouble to compose, and when eventually arranged as here given, there was an unpleasant doubt upon their minds as to whether all those long words so carefully picked out and strung together were not, somehow or other, more correct in sound than in sense.

Well, so long as it *sounded* all right that was all that really mattered. And really, when read by Willie, with just an extra tone of pompousness and grandeur, and without any attempts at undue emphasis, which might so easily destroy the rhythm, and prove fatal to the scanty vein of sense running through the words, the effect upon the whole was decidedly satisfactory, and, to our youthful minds, reflected great credit upon the authors, whose renown as scholars was henceforth enhanced tenfold.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE SCAMP OVERHEARS A SECRET.

THE address, carefully refolded, was then handed over to the sceptre-bearer, who was supposed to keep it in safe custody for his royal mistress: whilst she, in response to Willie Knowles' retiring salutation, bowed low, and said,—

"I thank you very cordially, my Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, and you, my faithful liege subjects, for the very loyal words in which you have addressed me this day. It will, I am sure, give Her Most Gracious Majesty much pleasure to receive from me the report of those earnest and heartfelt expressions of attachment to her throne, which have just fallen from the lips of the Lord Mayor.

"On her behalf, as well as on my own, I beg to assure you that we shall ever regard it in the light of a privilege and a pleasure to lend our patronage and presence to any cause which may, in the future, affect the public weal,—as does, in so eminent a degree, the event of to-day."

"Hear! hear! Three cheers for the Princess!" burst from the Scamp, and immediately the air rang with the hearty responses of the boys.

Miss Royce took advantage of the noise to turn towards Mrs. Hughes, who stood beside her, and to whisper hastily, "It's lucky that my audience is not a very critical one! I should

scarcely be able to put my speech before my scholars as an example in composition, should I? And then—I am shockingly ignorant of that sort of thing!—but a princess should scarcely use the word ‘loyal’ with reference to herself, and talk to people as her ‘subjects,’ I believe. But it is always so difficult on the spur of the moment to think of the right words to use, that one ought to feel fairly satisfied if one can think of anything at all to say!”

“Very true,” rejoined Mrs. Hughes, emphatically; and then they turned away from each other, and tried their best to make their smiling faces resume a becoming air of gravity.

Still clinging to my end of the royal robes, I had squeezed in between the two ladies, in order to gain a good view of the proceedings, and now, inferring from Miss Royce’s tone, and the few words which I had overheard, that she was running down her own speech, I seized her hand impulsively, and looking anxiously up into her face, exclaimed eagerly, “It was beautiful, Miss Royce; it was, indeed!”

Just then, however, Mat stepped shyly forward, and “Silence!” having been loudly proclaimed by the Scamp, Miss Royce merely patted my cheek with an approving smile, and moved forward a pace to where Mat knelt on one knee, ready to present her with the trowel, which he had neatly and laboriously covered with tin foil and gilt paper.

Accepting the gift with another low bow, she handed it at once to Hugh Marshall, the “Gold Stick in Waiting,” as we had dubbed him, in imitation of a certain title which had recently afforded us vast amusement, when reading the account of some regal ceremony.

The “Gold Stick” stooped down, and thrust the trowel deep into an earthy spot which had been previously selected and marked. Then, bending low, Her Royal Highness grasped the handle, and, with a quick turn of the wrist, loosened the clod of earth, and deposited it safely upon the surface of the ground.

"Three cheers, again, boys!" cried the Scamp, excitedly, throwing his cap into the air, "Hip, hip, hip, hurrah!"

And then, before the last cheer had died away, he suddenly started "God save the Queen," in a loud, uncertain tone of voice, utterly regardless of time or tune, and wholly ignoring the fact that his knowledge of the words and their proper sequence was exceedingly imperfect. However, no one troubled much about that, and very soon he was warmly supported by the strength of the entire company, though the combined effect, it must be confessed, was decidedly more lusty than musical.

The "putting away" part of every form of recreation is always the least agreeable one, and is, perhaps, especially obnoxious to children; moreover, in this case, every one was anxious to make a start with the proposed works. Still, the return journey must, in honour bound, be undertaken with some degree of ceremony; so the scattered procession was reorganized, and despatched once more to the house. By that evening, enough of the railway was completed to send a train on its trial trip.

Stations, built with bricks manufactured from the clayey earth of our gardens, each with its little doorway and unglazed windows, its roof roughly thatched with rushes and grass-stems, and its raised platform all sparkling and glistening with its covering of powdered white spar, were erected at short intervals along the line. The roadway consisted of a shallow trench about twelve inches wide, the bottom being patted down as hard, smooth, and level, as our spades could make it.

Most of the line was on an incline, so that it was only necessary to wind the clock-work engine up one way, the return journey being performed from the mere impetus of its own weight, without any further assistance.

"What a bore it is that it won't always go straight!" cried Willie Knowles, who had been appointed superintendent of the line, after the train had twice run full tilt into the bank, and had been upset.

sufficient energy left to ascend the corresponding incline on this side, and running on at a slackened pace, tilted right over upon a heap of earth, which, for the present, marked the boundary of the completed portion of the railway.

"Bravo ! Hurrah !" cried two or three together.

"Didn't it go well ?"

"Isn't it a jolly spree ?"

"Ever so much better than horses, eh ?"

"That is just because it's fresher !" replied Sam, who came up that moment, and considered himself personally appealed to by the questioner, though he had really addressed some one else ; but then the Scamp was always known to be the most vigorous and untiring advocate for playing at "horses" of any one in the whole school.

"I only wish we had two or three trains going at once," said Freeman, continuing the original topic of conversation. "How splendidly they could pass at the stations !"

"I tell you what. I'll go shares with you in buying one," exclaimed Willie Knowles.

"All right ! We'll go to the village to-morrow afternoon, if—oh bother ! there goes the tea-bell. I'm blessed if I should have thought it was as late as that !"

"By which," interrupted the Scamp, pompously, "you expressly wish us to observe that you are *not* 'blessed : ' for my part, I should never have supposed that *you* were likely to be !" And then, dodging quickly to one side, he set off running towards the house, laughing a mocking laugh as he sped away.

"We shan't be allowed to come out again afterwards," some one shouted, as the boys began to throw down their tools, and run homewards.

"Why not, I should like to know ?"

"Because we've been making such a mess of ourselves. Didn't you hear Miss Royce say that she would put off tea for an hour, but that when once we did come in to clean and tidy up, we were not to go out again ?"

And, indeed, most of us were in a fine state of dirt! We who had been so diligently engaged in brick-making were grimy up to our very noses and eyes; for all the kneading and moulding necessary to bring the sticky mud into proper form had been executed by hand, and though the result had proved so highly satisfactory, the manufacture had left its traces behind upon both skin and clothes alike.

At tea-time that night, I had finished amongst the first, and as I sat heedlessly looking round the table, my eye was attracted by Mrs. Hughes, who, beckoning at the same time with her finger, whispered across for me to come and stand beside her. Without turning away from Mrs. Royce, she placed one arm affectionately round my waist, drawing me so close in to her side that our heads almost touched one another.

For a few minutes I stood playing rather nervously with the pendant hanging from her necklet—an imitation in gold of a split pod, with its row of tiny, round peas visible between the smooth shining sides of the shell, which had already become an object of interest and admiration amongst certain of the boys, myself included. Rather to my discomfiture, the wearer, instead of attending to me, after calling me publicly forth, was conversing volubly in French with Mrs. Royce and her daughter; whilst several of the boys, down each long row, were doing their best to make me laugh, by covertly making signs and grimaces behind the shelter of their neighbours' backs.

We always pricked up our ears when we heard French talked at table. It was a well-known sign that the conversation so carried on was not intended to reach us: hence the strong natural desire evinced by every one to catch some stray word or phrase, which should prove to be some clue, however slight, to the mysterious topic then under discussion. Of course, in the majority of cases, the attempt was wholly vain; for, with the exception of a few who from long experience had grown familiar with the words by which they knew that "holidays," of some sort or another, was the theme of the speakers, not one

of us was ever one whit the wiser for our close attention to the conversation. Presently, however, Mrs. Hughes turned away, saying in an undertone, "Then you give me leave to tell him?"

And Mrs. Royce having nodded an assent, she bent her head close to mine, whispering, "Would you like to hear a little secret?"

"Yes, please," I said, shyly, blushing red, for the eyes of the whole school seemed to be steadily fixed upon me.

Then a sudden fear seized me, lest the news should be connected in any way with "Springall Jack," or our clandestine visit to his premises, making my heart beat fast, and the blood rush more hotly to my cheeks, as I added, falteringly,—"that is, if it is nothing dreadful!"

"Oh, no, it is nothing at all dreadful—at least I don't suppose any of you will think so!" and Mrs. Hughes' face wore a reassuringly amused smile, as she glanced across the table at Miss Royce.

I drew a smothered sigh of relief

Alas! how frequently the recollection of that stealthy scamper out of bounds rose to my mind, causing me, with the aid of a lively imagination, such bitter pangs of terror and remorse as only the groundless alarms of a guilty conscience can produce.

"What is it? What is it? Do tell *me*?" cried Harry, clutching the calf of my leg tightly between his fingers in his eagerness to make me attend to him, when at length the secret had been divulged into my highly-favoured ears, and the announcement had been observed to call up a broad grin of pleased satisfaction upon my lips.

"Yes, you may tell him," said Mrs. Hughes, rightly interpreting my upturned look of inquiry; whilst at the same moment I contrived to writhle myself free from Harry's importunate grasp.

The Scamp leaned anxiously forward as I whispered into Harry's ear, stretching right across poor Mat, who sat between, in his eagerness to overhear.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE EXCURSION (NOT WORDSWORTH'S).

IN spite of my lowered voice, the Scamp's quick ear must have caught each word, for, with an excited jump upon his seat, and a quick, eager glance along the faces turned expectantly towards our end of the table, he burst out, regardless of all customary restraint, "Hurrah! hurrah! We are going The Excursion to-morrow, boys!"

At this unexpected piece of intelligence, there was a half-stifled roar of delighted surprise all round the room, and then, as though suddenly seized with an impression that the usual bounds of propriety had been unduly exceeded, all eyes turned instantaneously upon Mrs. Royce, with a view of ascertaining, if possible, what effect such unwonted behaviour had produced upon her seldom ruffled temper.

Her face, however, was discreetly hidden behind her handkerchief, but the expression in her eyes, as she looked from Mrs. Hughes to her daughter, and back again to the Scamp, told us plainly enough that we might safely indulge in a moderate burst of exultation, without fear of being checked.

Indeed, the extraordinary contortions of the Scamp in his praiseworthy attempt to subdue the expression of his feelings, until he might give unrestrained vent to them, were quite ludicrous enough to send others besides Harry and little Mary Hughes into almost uncontrollable fits of sympathetic laughter.

The next morning all was excitement, until the brake and four horses drove up, which, fortunately for every one's peace of mind, occurred almost as soon as we had dismissed a hasty, early breakfast.

We amused ourselves, during the interval before we were allowed to mount, by watching the various hampers and parcels as they were carried out one after the other, and stowed away on the box, and under the seats, most of them being greeted with pleasantly jocular remarks as to their size and probable contents.

Then, when the signal was given, in we all scrambled, helter-skelter, amongst a whirl of confused cries from one to another of—"Come and sit here!" "You can't stay there, that's my seat," or "Go and squat over there, can't you?" and so on.

At length we were really off, and fairly on our way. Through the quiet village, almost deserted at this time of the morning, except within the doors of the great cloth-mills abounding everywhere, and out again into the deep country lanes beyond.

No need to amuse us in any way, during this first stage of our journey. Each field and cottage, every wood and overhanging tree, all the birds and the animals, the flowers, the country folk wending their way to the town, all and every one had their own special charm to our delighted sight just then, and even the sun came in for a large share of popular attention, all the more, probably, for the dreaded clouds which seemed to be gathering up, and threatening to dim his bright glory for awhile. Then what fun it was to lean far over the side of the brake, and watch the hot horses drinking, when we pulled up, half way to our destination, before the doors of an old-fashioned, ivy-covered inn, where both the quadrupeds and their driver could have an opportunity of slaking their thirst.

How impatient the horses were to drink, and how envious they seemed of each other!

For the hostler only brought one bucket for all four, and they were piteous eyes of entreaty that the "leader" turned

upon him, as he took the cooling draught first of all to the "wheelers."

And when at length it came to the front, it was too tantalizing to hear the splash of the water, and see it dripping from his companion's lips : so, with a resistless impulse, he suddenly thrust his nose into the coveted bucket, and tried to oust the other out. But the hostler, disapproving of such greedy conduct, punished him by giving the old grey a longer draught, whilst the repulsed bay stood looking on, with wide open nostrils, the drops he had managed to reach just moistening his eager mouth, and making him long for a closer acquaintance with the heaven-sent liquid.

Then our coachman made his appearance once more, and though he did not appear to have stinted *himself* with respect to drink, he would not hear of the horses being allowed to satisfy their thirst. Mounting the box, he took the reins from Willie Knowles, and pulling up the reluctant leader's head from the depths of the bucket, cracked his whip, and started us once more upon the road. It was a very beautiful place that we had come to. A great hill stretching gently away, until a point was reached at which it seemed to have abruptly paused—as though to survey the surpassing loveliness of the plain below—and so had never remembered to move on again.

The view from this side, whence it descended so steeply to the valley beneath, was certainly magnificent.

A mighty plain lay mapped out before us, its hedge-rows and its wooded knolls, its clustering hamlets and tapering spires, its farm-houses and country seats, the pleasant lanes winding up hill and down dale, all lying peacefully at our feet, in a grand confusion of light and shadow under the shifting clouds.

Away towards the centre of the landscape rolled the mighty Severn, looking like a great shining serpent, coiling its silver sides in and out amongst the dark woods and verdant pastures, and glistening with dazzling brilliance wherever the sunshine caught it in its winding course.

Shutting off the horizon right in front of us were the Welsh mountains, the haze arising from their smoking furnaces dimly perceptible, even at this great distance.

And then the eye, instinctively following the line of the mighty hills, caught sight, on the extreme right, of the high range of the Malvern hills, lying out there like some purple bank of clearly-defined, beautifully-formed clouds, tinged here and there with the bright light of the morning sun. Back once more, right in the opposite direction, one sees the Severn, widening until it attains the dimensions and title of the Channel, where the horizon is bounded by one vast expanse of gleaming water, stretching so far away that one cannot readily distinguish the spot at which the clouds appear to dip into it, before setting off on their journey to the sun.

We sat there on the summit for a long time, gazing at the vale spread out before our eyes ; even the restless Scamp being contented, for once, to sit perfectly quiet and almost speechless : until Anne, coming up amongst us unobserved, broke the spell by the welcome news that dinner was quite ready. At this piece of intelligence, a regular stampede took place towards the tree under which that feast was spread, which had, alas ! such far stronger attractions for only too many of us than those less material ones which Nature had so bountifully provided.

It was no slight consolation to us short-legged urchins to reflect, as we ran, that those who headed the rush were forced to wait until Mrs. Royce's arrival, before they could commence operations : so that they had gained no additional advantage by their superior fleetness—unless it were, indeed, the very doubtful one of choice of seats ; and these, being merely the cushions from the brake, spread upon the ground, were superior or inferior only according to their position in relation to certain especially tempting dishes, which adorned the snowy whiteness of the table-cloth at sundry particular spots.

What fun it was, dining in the open air ! and what gaping holes we soon made in the plentiful supply of meat pies, hams,

cold joints, and plum puddings ! to say nothing of the hard-boiled eggs, which looked so shiny and smooth when stripped of their shells, and which we could roll about on the cloth with no fear of any mess if they should haplessly break, and, on this one day, without any chance of our amusement being cut short by a stern request to remember our manners.

Boys, too, have far less aversion to an occasional insect on their plate, or in their glass, than a more elderly person might have ; consequently, in our estimation, no drawback to the perfect enjoyment of the meal was experienced by any one of our number.

Some of the boys, who had brought their butterfly nets, set off after dinner to try their luck amongst the bushes and the grassy hollows scattered about on the brow of the hill.

They did not prove very successful in their pursuit, however, for the season was getting rather far advanced ; so Harry and I soon left them, and went to join those who were playing cricket.

They were not playing "sides," so we were at once permitted to take our places as fielders, and to come in to the wickets as soon as our turn came round,—which, to our delight, happened very shortly.

"You see," said Bob North, winking to Smedley, who was wicket-keeper just then, "they'll be useful as fielders, and won't be able to stop in any time, scarcely,—either of 'em."

"Oh, come !" cried Willie Knowles, "as umpire I object to that kind of bowling for a youngster like this."

"All right !" replied Smedley, who was bowling to me round-arm, just as he had done to my predecessor. Then he added, good-naturedly, "I'll give him some underhand, then ; look out for the 'twist,' young 'un."

Up came the ball, not in the least straight for my wickets, apparently, and at a pace that was quite reassuring, after the alarming velocity of that first one which we honoured by describing as "swift." So I swiped boldly out, missed the ball, to my surprise, and very nearly lost my balance as well. Then

I looked round, and found my middle stump knocked on one side, and the bails keeping the ball company upon the ground.

"Give him another try!" cried one or two kind-hearted boys; so the bails were replaced, and once more I held the bat, stiffly and awkwardly, before the wickets.

"Hurrah! Well done! Run, run!" the Scamp called out, dancing round his bat at the other wickets, as by a lucky fluke I "slipped" the ball, and scored one run.

Unfortunately, that was the end of the over, so the change of places only brought me again under fire of the ball, without any intervening rest. It was Johnnie Harris who was bowling now, and very straight his balls came, too.

"Blocked, for a kid!" cried the Scamp, condescendingly, as by the merest chance I contrived to save my stumps from a second total destruction.

But the next ball, rising abruptly after it had pitched, caught me sharply on the fingers, making me bite my lips to keep back the tears which started to my eyes at the acuteness of the pain.

"Hullo! didn't that hurt? I thought it caught your knuckles!" exclaimed Willie Knowles, kindly.

"Not m-m-much, thanks," I faltered, still clinging tightly to the bat-handle, though my fingers felt numb and dead from the blow.

But it was no use! and the next ball passed clean through my wickets, with scarcely an attempt on my part to prevent it.

Then I gladly let the bat slip out of my trembling hands, and walked slowly away to my fielding-place, holding the wounded fingers tightly in my other hand.

"I am sure that *must* have hurt you, young'un!" said Willie Knowles, following me, "for I know well enough what it is to have a ball on your knuckles. Let's look and see how much damage it has done."

I looked up at him with tears welling to my eyes, strongly belieing my words of a minute ago. How kind he was!

Even then, with my fingers aching and tingling so, I forgot, for one brief moment, the physical pain that I was suffering, and thought only how much I should like to be like him—so strong and handsome, yet so clever and good-natured, that in my estimation he seemed to embody every quality and virtue that the most fastidious hero-worshipper could desire.

“Why, they are bleeding ; it must have been a hard whack ! But don’t cry—there’s a brave youngster ; it won’t make them any the better to bathe them in salt water of that sort, you know !”

I smiled faintly, as I hastily drew my sleeve across my eyes.

“There ! if I tie your handkerchief round, so, they will soon get easy again : it is the first pain that’s the sharpest, nearly always.”

So, the operation completed, I went back to my old position on the field, in spite of Willie’s advice that I “had far better give up playing cricket, for this afternoon at any rate.”

For some time I had nothing to do but to think how badly my fingers smarted still.

The Scamp got out before long, and Hugh Marshall took his place, Harry holding his ground manfully at the opposite end.

Presently Harry hit a ball feebly in my direction, and set off running at once.

Amidst a general shout of excitement, I rushed forward, and picked up the ball to throw it in to the wickets. In my flurry it dropped from my fingers, rolling away for a yard or so, whilst a dismal howl of disappointment rose from the boys as Harry and Hugh set off for a second run. The next instant I had recovered the ball, and flung it with all my might towards the wicket-keeper.

Alas ! alas ! Either my wrapped-up fingers, or the state of agitation into which the mingled cries and cheers had thrown me, resulted in an unexpected want of aim, and to my horror and amazement, I beheld the ball fly straight as an arrow at the back of Rogers’ head, and, striking him sharply, fall to

the ground behind him like a plummet. His hand was not yet well enough for him to join in the game, so he had volunteered to umpire for us, and accordingly was standing only a few yards in front of me in a straight line with the wickets.

I shall never forget the sudden look of anger and surprise that he turned upon me, as he put his hand quickly to his head, and sprung round the next minute to avenge himself upon the perpetrator of such an insult.

The boys were all laughing ; for to them it was a new form of a good practical joke. But to him and to me, it was nothing less than a downright, earnest reality, as I could see by the quick gleam of passion in his eyes ; and without waiting for further warning, and never daring to offer one word of explanation or apology, I turned and fled for protection to Miss Royce.

I suppose terror added swiftness to my feet, for I kept my distance—short though it were—in front of him, and arrived first, breathless and terrified, at the little knoll upon which the teachers were seated, keeping watch over our various movements. Half defiant, half fearful of what might follow, I threw myself down in the midst of them, never dreaming but that for the present moment, at any rate, I should be safe and secure in such awe-inspiring company.

But Rogers, blind with fury, and regardless of all consequences, dragged me struggling to my feet, before any one was sufficiently recovered from their surprise to interpose, and was just on the point of commencing to execute a vigorous and summary punishment upon me, when Miss Royce sprang to her feet with a startled cry, and seizing him by the arm, shook him so sternly that he was forced to loose his hold upon me almost immediately.

“Tom, Tom, what *are* you doing? Do you know where you are, and how you are behaving, sir? Leave go of him, this minute—this very minute—do you hear me, Rogers?” and though she spoke in her sternest tone of authority, her voice

seemed to shake a little, as if with suppressed wrath and unusual excitement.

Checked in his attempt to wreak his summary vengeance upon me, and still boiling over with ungovernable rage, which the pain he suffered in his injured hand served greatly to increase, he swung swiftly round, hitting out hard at the firm steady hand that was restraining him thus from his purpose. But a bad aim, and an insecure footing on sloping ground, threw him off his balance, and, with Miss Royce's hand still clutching his collar, he fell heavily to the ground, almost dragging her with him. There, bursting into a storm of angry tears, he rolled upon the ground, hitting out right and left with his one sound hand, and kicking furiously in all directions with both legs at once.

Miss Royce contrived dexterously to disengage herself, and stepping aside out of reach of his vigorous kicks, said, in an outwardly composed voice, "I am not going to struggle with you, Rogers ; so you had better get up and calm yourself at once."

Every one was standing round in almost breathless excitement, for the boys had hastened up in all directions at the first sign of an approaching "scene"; and certainly never before had such a flagrant instance of braving the authorities been witnessed in this school, through all the many years of its existence.

Even Mrs. Royce did not attempt to interfere at this stage of the proceedings, for it was very obvious that it would be worse than useless to say anything to Rogers, until he should have recovered from the blinding influence of his passion.

I was standing close beside her, trembling violently from the effects of my recent fright, and quietly wiping away the tears with one corner of my handkerchief, when up came Willie Knowles.

"Cheer up, and be a little man!" he said, putting his arm affectionately round my neck; "for you can't have been much hurt so far, and are not likely to be now, you see. It is no use

to cry out before you are hurt, is it?" he added, pulling away my handkerchief and looking into my tear-stained face with a kind smile.

"It is not much *use* crying *afterwards*!" I replied, smiling dimly through my tears, though I felt my mouth twitch ominously, as though another sob wanted to come, whether or no.

It becomes rather wearisome and monotonous after a while, to lie for long together on your back kicking out savagely into the air, with a number of spectators watching you, and no one troubling to interfere with you; so before long, Rogers became less violent, and eventually, cramming his fist into his eyes, turned over, and lay quietly face downwards on the ground.

But as soon as Miss Royce attempted to raise him to his feet, he shook himself petulantly, and letting his legs hang limp and jointless, slipped back again, sulkily, to the old position, with a fresh sob and another moan.

"Mother, perhaps you had better send the boys away, now," said Miss Royce at last.

"I daresay we shall be able to manage him better when alone," she added, under her breath.

"Yes, boys," said Mrs. Royce, "you had better run off now; I am grieved that our holiday should be marred by so painful and disgraceful an incident as this—but I will not detain you to talk about that now. It is time for some one to see about boiling the kettle for tea, so you can go and assist Miss Baxter in picking up sticks and kindling a fire, if you like."

The idea, of course, was hailed with enthusiasm, for where is the boy, anywhere, who would refuse so splendid an opportunity for forming, free from danger or detection, a closer acquaintance with that most popular of elements,—fire? So, whilst some of the group went back to collect the cricket things, the others made off for the spot, near the great spreading oak-tree under which we had dined, which had been selected by Mrs. Royce as the most suitable position upon which to erect our fire-place.



CHAPTER XV.

FRENCH AND ENGLISH.

"Now," said Miss Baxter as soon as every one had reached the place, "we will divide into three gangs--one shall gather the sticks, the other collect stones, and the third build them into proper form."

With so many willing helpers, it was not long before we had built up a fire-place that would have done credit to a band of gipsies; in fact it was on a very much more elaborate plan than the ones which those wandering people are in the habit of erecting, merely for one or two nights' use.

First of all came a flooring of those large, smooth, flat stones in which the hill-side abounded, scattered loose here and there among the springing, mossy turf: many of them with a whole colony of wood-lice and other insects underneath, who, resenting this sudden intrusion of daylight and fresh air into their dark, dank homes, rushed hastily off into the grass tufts growing thickly round, and hid themselves there, safe from all further danger or pursuit.

Then, almost all round this base, we set up a low wall of loose stones, piled one upon the other, and fitted together with all the skill of which Willie Knowles, Bob North, and Johnnie Harris were possessed, with Mat, Harry, and myself working under them as their assistants.

What a pile of dry sticks the fuel collectors got together, to be sure! So high, that when it was all stacked up, there was no

suitable place for the kettle; so down it came again, whilst a search was instituted for two or three poles, strong enough and long enough to suspend the homely, though essential, utensil in its proper position. But none were to be found, without cutting some out of the copse hard by, and Miss Baxter would not hear of such a proposal as that.

So there was no help for it but to build up two high piles of stones as hobs, with just enough space between them for the kettle to rest firmly, with no fear of its upsetting.

Then the fire was carefully relaid, Miss Baxter struck the match, and the next second—out it went !

“Why, you must hold your hands round it—so—Miss Baxter, or of course the wind will blow it out !” cried the Scamp, a trifle contemptuously, as he pushed his way through the group to his teacher’s side. “Why, I’ve helped my brother light his cigars scores of times on far windier days than this :—and helped him smoke them too, I can tell you !” he added in a loud aside, looking round to wink at us knowingly, and smacking his lips together suggestively, as he grinned back at us over his shoulder.

Very soon, under his experienced directions, the fire was successfully lighted, and then how the dry twigs crackled and sputtered as the flames leapt high into the air, quite encircling the great black kettle in a halo of bright, tongue-shaped fire.

“I say !” cried the Scamp, in a tone of sudden animation, as soon as the success of the fire was firmly established, “I vote for a general adjournment to the targets ; young Robson and Mat got ever such a lot of bullets there just now. I should have gone long ago, if you hadn’t bullied me into playing cricket, you old wretch !” he continued, shaking his fist with an amusing air of affected defiance in Willie Knowles’ face.

Most of the boys had thrown themselves down upon the grass, to watch the flames shooting up their forked tongues, and the smoke blowing away in great curling clouds of white.

I was seated cross-legged upon the turf, supporting Willie Knowles' head upon my lap, and remaining contentedly in the one cramped position, regardless of my aching knees, so long as *he* were comfortable and satisfied.

His hat was thrown off, and his eyes were partially closed in quiet enjoyment ; for, queer as it may sound, I was engaged in my favourite amusement of soothing him into a state of blissful rest, by gently stroking his long, straight nose up and down with the tip of my forefinger, occasionally varying the process by softly drawing his dark curls between my fingers ; for he always declared that nothing tickled him so delightfully, or calmed him into so serene a frame of mind, as these two tricks of mine.

All the other boys jumped up eagerly at Sam's proposal, and set off at once to race him to the targets, audibly wondering at their own stupidity in not having thought of such a thing before. So Willie, too, rolled lazily over, and scrambled to his feet, pulling me up after him, and away we started in the wake of the rest. The targets consisted of large, oblong sheets of iron, the painted rings on which were worn off in places, under the combined action of shot and shower, and their surface thickly studded with many a deep dent, where the bullets had struck fiercely when their impetuous career was so suddenly cut short in mid air ; whilst a clean-cut hole right through the bull's eye of one, bore a lasting testimony to the more than ordinary success of some lucky rifleman.

Behind these, the steep slopes of the bank were drilled in hundreds of places by the shots that had fallen wide of the mark ; and many were the shouts of delight that rose from the boys that afternoon, as one after another unearthed a bullet almost as bright and uninjured as when it left the rifle.

"This is the little hut where the marker has to stand," explained Sam, pompously, pointing, as he spoke, to a tiny little bullet-proof erection in front of the targets, but considerably to one side of them ; "and woe betide him if there were

to be any mistake in the signalling, and he were to come out before they had finished firing !”

“ I wish they would come and shoot, to-night,” said Smedley, seating himself on the top of the grassy ridge. “ They would have been here by now, I suppose, though ; for it would soon get too dusk for them to see, now that the evenings are drawing in so.”

“ Oh, there is plenty of time yet !” exclaimed Hugh Marshall. “ Do you think they’ll be likely to come, Sam ? You are pretty sure to know, if any one does !”

“ No, they won’t !” replied the Scamp, decisively. “ I asked a man this morning, and he said it is so far from the town that they only use these ranges certain nights of the week, and this is not one of them, worse luck !”

“ What a bore ! It must be so jolly to watch them.”

“ And jollier still to be one of them !” said Sam, with a burst of enthusiasm.

“ It would be nice enough as far as the shooting is concerned, I daresay,” said Willie Knowles, gravely, “ but I don’t guess the volunteers—or the militia either, for that matter—would really care to go to war, when it came to.”

“ Not they !” laughed Johnnie Harris, scornfully. “ Why, half of them would never join at all if they really thought that there was the faintest scent of war in the air, and the other half would run away rather than stand to be fired at.”

“ Oh, oh, *would* they ?” jeered the Scamp, warmly. “ That’s *your* opinion, is it ? Perhaps you are judging others by yourself,—eh ? I’ve got rather a better opinion of an Englishman than that, I’m happy to say !”

“ Oh, of course the typical Englishman, in a book, would never dream of turning his back upon the foe, but the real, matter-of-fact, every-day sort of chap, in the volunteers especially, would be more likely to act on the belief that,—

‘ He who fights and runs away,
Will live to fight another day.’

I don't mind betting:—that is, if he did not absolutely refuse to fight at all!"

"Well," rejoined the Scamp, "I don't care whether *they* only join because of the shooting, or not; I only know that *I* should like to be a soldier, and go to war, most tremendously. Only fancy, putting your gun to your shoulder and just taking a good squinny, and then—'click!' and you'd have pecked some one off on the opposite hill in grand style."

"Yes, and just fancy some one returning the compliment!" said Willie, grimly.

"They couldn't, stupid, if I killed them first!" and the Scamp laughed with aggravating glee to think how nicely he had caught Willie in his words. "Besides," he added presently, "I would depend upon my usual good luck, and risk all that."

"Well, you are a cold-blooded, heartless, old thing, Scamp, and I don't think much of your friendship, if you wouldn't mind rolling me over with a bullet," said Mat, half in earnest, half jocularly.

"Oh, but I shouldn't shoot *you*, don't you see? One would never have to fight his friends."

"Well, but then they are *some one's* friends, and fathers, and brothers, and all that; and, besides, you *might* have to shoot some of us, if you were a soldier;—look at those French—"

"No fear!" interrupted Sam, indignantly, "we shall never have any of *that* sort of thing to do in England. And, for all you may say, I *should* like to be a soldier,—most *tre—men—jeously*," and the emphasis on the first syllable of this last word spoke volumes in itself.

"I must say *I* think war is horrid, and cruel, and barbarous," spoke up Willie again. "I don't see how any one with a spark of pity or human kindness can go and shoot down another man. Even though he belongs to a different nation, and is *not your* brother, or father, or friend, he is some one else's; and just think of all the misery and suffering and sorrow that—"

"Just think of the tea!" broke in the Scamp, laughing, as he jumped to his feet, glad, I thought, of an excuse to leave a discussion which was growing almost too hot for him.

We had all seated ourselves in a group on the very summit of these steep mounds behind the targets, and now scrambled pell-mell to the ground, some slipping, some rolling, some running, all with our pockets more or less heavy with the weight of our collected treasures, and hastened off at once to the spot where Miss Royce stood vigorously waving the white handkerchief which had first been detected by the Scamp's quick eye.

We found Rogers seated at one end of the—table, I was going to say, but in reality our only table was the ground, too far away from any of us for him to be able to speak to any one, and looking thoroughly sulky and miserable, the traces of his recent trouble still evident, outwardly, in swollen eyelids and red, shiny cheeks.

The kettle had behaved beautifully, having worked itself up (with the willing assistance of the fire!) into a perfect frenzy of boil and steam, without a mishap of any kind to mar its contentment, to which it gave expression in its own sedate and cheerful manner. And really it had some grounds for singing its own praises so loudly, for it had successfully achieved a result that is not always attained at an open-air tea-party, viz. the natural purity of the water, without even a suspicion of the readily tainting smoke.

And as for the buns and great slices of cakes that formed the substantial feature of the repast—to which the tea was simply a cheering and lively accompaniment—they tasted just as such things only *can* taste to hungry schoolboys, whose appetites have been whetted by a day of vigorous exercise in the bracing air of a high, breezy hill-top.

"Oh, if you please, Mrs. Royce, *may* we go to the top of the hill just once more?" pleaded Mat, earnestly, as soon as tea was over.

"Oh, yes, *do* let us!" cried quite a chorus of voices, from all parts of the table-cloth.

"But you will be too tired, after having run about so much already."

"Oh, no, indeed we shan't; and, besides, it is not very far."

And so, permission having been granted, though not without some pressure, in ten minutes' time most of us were baring our heads to the breeze, looking down upon the wind-bowed trees that grew, bent and crooked, upon the steep slope of the hill; and far away, over the tallest of their heads—for in such an exposed situation all were of stunted growth—we saw the same beautiful landscape that had charmed us so much in the morning, looking, if possible, still more smilingly lovely under the tender rays of the warm evening sunlight, as they slanted down upon wood and water, meadow and cottage roof, before they finally withdrew, for a season, the mysterious influence which was causing everything to glow with such an indescribable richness of soft, harmonious colour.

"Oh! it is splendid—splendid!" cried Mat, enthusiastically, as we turned to leave, after taking a long, lingering, farewell look. "How I should like to stay, and watch the sun go down behind those glorious hills! Only see, Bernie, how the sunlight catches the Severn down there,—isn't it like a lake of polished gold? And over there, how purple and distinct the Malverns stand out against such a fiery sky!"

"It is almost as good as that picture I told you about—'The Plains of Heaven,' you know—almost, but not quite. You want the snow-capped mountains, with the glow of the sun lighting them up; but that I suppose would be out of character with such a scene as this, and would, most likely, dwarf all those hills that look so grand and high to us now. Do you know, I once heard my father say that if you watch the sun setting upon the great masses of glistening white snow among the Alps, you will see the fierce, fiery glow fade into the most perfect of rose colours, which gradually pales, and pales, until

it dies away altogether, and leaves the snow so purely, ghastly white, that the very contrast sends you away with an involuntary shudder, to think and dream of Death."

Just then the Scamp threw up his hat, with a loud "Good-bye!" quite forgetting, in his usual rash, impetuous manner, that his hat was light, and the wind strong. So away it went, circling round and round in the air, until it fell with a sudden swoop, and bowled rapidly down the hill, fortunately in the very direction in which we were going.

With a laugh and a shout, several of the boys started after it in hot pursuit, leaving us two in comparative solitude.

We walked slowly down over the springy turf, our arms around each other's necks, and as we walked, I poured out to Mat the story of my wonderful dream; for the glory of the view, and the quiet peace of the evening, had so recalled it to my memory that I felt an eager yearning to relate it to some one; and who was so sympathetic and attentive a listener as gentle, thoughtful, little Mat Davis?

"And now I am worse than ever!" I said, despondingly, when the recital was at an end. "I had made a sort of peace with Rogers, and I was *really trying* to like him; but now we shall be greater enemies than before, and he will always hate me, and owe me a grudge, and I am quite sure I never *meant* to hit him with that unlucky ball."

So I rambled on with my troubles, Mat trying vainly to console me, by assuring me that if we were not able to be exactly "peacemakers," yet that, in his opinion, we could not reasonably be blamed, if we persistently determined that the war should be all on one side, and one only.

It seemed quite like a rude breaking in upon our thoughts, when at last we reached "The Camp," as we had nicknamed the tree under which we took our meals, and all the noisy gaiety of the boys forced us once more to laugh and joke, instead of think and dream.

"I cannot imagine where our coachman can be!" exclaimed

Mrs. Royce, taking out her watch for the third or fourth time within the last five minutes. "I told him so particularly that we should want to start punctually at half-past six, and it is nearly that now."

"Run and see whether he is coming," called Miss Royce to Willie, who was just then busily engaged in carving a miniature basket out of a large horse-chestnut, whilst I stood looking on with pleased interest.

Snapping his knife to, and dropping the chestnut into his pocket, away he ran, I and the Scamp setting off after him, followed by several other volunteers who were standing near. But Miss Royce's exclamation of "Stop, boys, I didn't mean you all to go!" checked them, and caused them to turn back disappointed. Sam, however, professing not to understand that the words were intended for him, ran heedlessly on, dragging me along with him.

"Stop a jiffey, Bill!" he cried, breathlessly, after a smart run had brought us to a steep bank which fringed the turnpike road. "If we climb this tree, we can see down the road, without going any further."

"Haul me up, will you?" I asked, as one behind the other they clambered into the branches, and in a brief space of time I was standing between them, clinging tightly to a bough growing a few inches above my head.

"Look! There is the town, down there. What a pretty little place, nestled in so snugly among the trees!"

"But I would far rather live up here than down in that hollow," remarked the Scamp, jogging restlessly up and down upon the bough upon which he stood.

"Up in this tree, I suppose you mean?" said Willie, laughing.

The Scamp's only reply was to burst into a flight of song, after his own peculiar style, of which the refrain was the only intelligible portion, and even that was mutilated in order to suit his version :—

“ Oh, would I were a bird !
Now isn't that absurd—
To hear a fellow sing,
He would he were a bird ? ”

“ Well, I don't see any sign of this man along the road ; we shall have to go on and rout him up, I suppose,” said Willie, unceremoniously interrupting Sam's melodious strains, whilst, as he spoke, he craned his neck far out to scan the road where it wound its way towards the village.

“ Why, here he is, close down below, you old blind-eye ! ” exclaimed Sam, who had checked his voice in order to lend more effectual assistance with his eyes.

“ So he is ! I was looking away towards those houses : one never does see anything when it's right under one's nose ! ”

“ Perhaps not, when a chap happens to have as big a one as yours ! ” retorted the Scamp.

And then, fearful of the vengeance which was sure to follow such an unwarrantable attack upon so sore a point (and this is only a “ figure of speech,” my dear young readers, for the point of Willie's nose was *not* really sore, neither did Sam venture to attack it, otherwise than by a verbal allusion !), he slipped actively out of Willie's reach, and swung himself lightly to the ground in a very few seconds. But I, who was more cautious and timid than the other two, fared worse, and found the task both difficult and tedious.

“ Jump ! ” cried Willie Knowles ; “ I'll catch you safe enough.” For in my perplexity, I had seated myself upon the last bough, my feet dangling helplessly in the air, whilst both hands clutched tight hold of the bough on either side of my knees.

Without waiting for a second invitation, I allowed myself to slide gently off my perch.

But alas ! alas ! a little, sharp, projecting knob caught fast hold of the seat of my knickerbockers, holding me suspended there in mid air, like any sprawling frog or struggling spider.



"SUSPENDED IN MID-AIR LIKE ANY SPRAWLING FROG."



CHAPTER XVI.

CAUGHT !

It was exactly the ludicrous sort of scene to delight the Scamp's fancy—and, indeed, it might well have tickled the imagination of graver folks than he. Accordingly, there he stood, looking on, and shaking so with laughter, that the tears began to trickle down his cheeks; until at length, from sheer exhaustion, he dropped upon the ground, and rolled there, holding his sides, and throwing himself into all sorts of indescribable contortions.

Willie Knowles, however, with more presence of mind, and seeing how scared and white my face had grown with fright at my critical position, ran forward, holding out his arms for me to drop into. A fresh struggle on my part resulted in the sudden sound of a sharp rent, and an instantaneous release from my awkward situation; from which I tumbled headlong into the outstretched arms below, with so violent a shock that Willie was almost thrown down, in spite of every precaution which forewarned expectation could suggest.

"Oh my! whatever *shall* I do?" I exclaimed, ruefully, as soon as I was once more planted firmly upon the ground, and had craned my neck over my shoulder, to try and take in the extent of the damage done to my clothes.

"It is a whapping hole, there's no mistake!" laughed Willie, and the truth of his remark was fully borne out by the torn end which dangled about my heels.

Sam lifted his head for a view of the catastrophe, but buried it in his hands again the next moment, to indulge in a fresh explosion of merriment at the absurd figure I cut.

The next instant he jumped up, and came forward. "Here, young fellow!" he said, "I'll pin it up for you in no time. Perhaps you will kindly let me know if I should run the pins into you."

"Perhaps I will!" I returned, laughing.

"And you will have to exercise your discretion—do you understand the term?—as to where and how you sit down. Now come along after that old fellow,—you two."

This unfortunate little accident had not taken much longer in reality than I have taken to describe it, so that our coachman was only so far ahead that we were able to catch him up after a smart run of a minute or so.

"Now then, old man!" began the Scamp, saucily, as soon as he had sufficiently recovered breath, "we've come to look after you. The old lady up yonder is in a fine way; you'll catch it nice and hot for being so late, I can tell you!"

Telling him to "Mind his own business, and not be imperent to his betters!" the man launched out a friendly cuff at Sam's head, who, however, managed to evade the blow by an agile spring up the high bank, where he walked coolly along on the sides of his feet, chaffing his adversary down below, with an amount of aggravating indifference to the possible consequences that was quite appalling to me.

In less than another quarter of an hour, the horses had been untied, and harnessed in their proper places once more, and we were fairly started on our homeward journey.

"Listen to me, boys!" Miss Royce called to us, when two or three of her pupils were growing a trifle rough and disorderly; "supposing we play at the game which we had last summer, when we were coming back from Bathurst Park."

"Oh, yes, let us!" cried the Scamp, delightedly. "Why, don't you remember it, Bill?—we score one for every sheep

two for each cow, three for each horse, four for a pig, five for a ladder, and so on; and then you try which side can get the most—don't you see? It's jolly fun, I can tell you. Come on, you chaps; turn round, and keep a sharp look-out—those on our side at least!"

"Well, you shall see who will score the most in a quarter of an hour: I will put down the numbers for you," said Miss Royce, taking out a pencil, and tearing a blank page off a letter as she spoke. "Only you must not kneel upon the seats like that—no, Sam, I won't have it, indeed; you may turn round as much as you please, but you must sit down properly."

The boys were all delighted with the idea, and were soon eagerly stretching their necks over the side to see what was coming in the distance, shouting triumphantly when a flock of sheep or a herd of cattle happened to come upon their side, more numerous than could be counted before they disappeared again into the distant view.

At last a rule had to be made that any group of more than ten should not be reckoned as above that number; and though this caused some groans of disappointment, when a flock of almost five times as many were passed, yet, in the end, it very much simplified matters. Sometimes we caught sight of a number of animals feeding quietly in the fields, a quarter of a mile ahead, and the road winding about so much would give rise to loud conjectures as to whose lot the prize would ultimately fall.

"They'll be ours!" cried the Scamp, dubiously, as a large herd of brown, white-faced cows came suddenly in view.

"Will they, though? You'll see!" returned Johnnie Harris, who was seated opposite to him, and was reaching as far over the side as he dared, without noticeably rising from his seat.

There was a brief pause. Then, in another couple of minutes, the sudden bend in the road had completely altered the apparent position of the eagerly-watched animals, to the Scamp's loudly expressed disgust and manifest disappointment.

"‘Nil desperandum,’ Scamp!" cried Willie, in an encouraging tone of voice, turning round on his seat by the driver, from whence he was able to command an uninterrupted view of the road.

"Beg pardon?" returned Sam, with an affected air of gravity, standing up, and placing one hand to his ear.

"‘Never despair,’ in plain English," roared back Willie, laughing.

"Ah, yes, yes; thank you. Now I understand. Didn't quite catch before:—French, wasn't it?" and Sam sank back into his seat amidst a general laugh.

"What do you say, now, Mr. John Harris? Who is going to score ten, now,—eh?"

"Why, not *you*!" replied Johnnie, excitedly, as we swung round a curve, so sharply that many of us involuntarily caught firm hold of the back rail.

"Yes, we shall, then."

"No—Yes—It's ours!"

"It's *ours*; put down ten for us, Miss Royce."

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Cross that off again, please, Miss Royce. It's ten to *us*. Oh! oh! oh!"

And as we rattled by, the quiet cows lifted their heads from their grazing, and looked up at us, surprised, with their great big meek eyes.

It was not often that their browsing was thus rudely disturbed by the sound of such boisterous voices in these quiet lanes. For our side was exulting loudly in our success, whilst the other, crestfallen but hopeful, chaffed us warmly back again, holding out threats of the coming victories which they were sure to win, they said.

The Scamp's voice, rising high above the general babel of jeers and groans, was upbraiding Willie Knowles for his perfidy in having deceived him, and threatening all sorts of dire calamities, which would be sure to befall him as the reward of such heartless conduct.

"I only advised you to 'cheer up'!" replied Willie, a roguish twinkle in his eyes; "don't you know that when fate is very much against people, the best thing that you can do is to advise them to 'never say die'!? It helps them on, ever so."

It was growing dusk and chill by the time that we pulled up at the "Half-way House" again, and Willie Knowles expressed a wish to come inside, where it was warmer.

There were plenty of volunteers to accept his offer of a change, and eventually Mat and the Scamp were allowed to sit upon the box, after due caution had been given to Smedley to sit upon the outside and keep tight hold of Mat, whose short legs could only just reach down to the lid of a hamper stowed away upon the footboard.

To my intense delight, Willie came and sat in Mat's vacant place, next to me.

After we had gone on again, and it had grown quite dark and rather cold, he let me nestle up against him, wrapping a large spare shawl of Miss Royce's right round both of us, until we were as snug and as comfortable as possible.

"Can't we have a song, Miss Royce?" inquired Johnnie Harris, presently. "It is so nice singing in the dark, with the horses' hoofs as an accompaniment—especially when you are rattling through the air at this pace."

"Will it not frighten the horses?" suggested Mrs. Royce, rather nervously; but the coachman assuring Johnnie Harris that they were steady old creatures, and would never be so foolish as to think of running away, with such a load behind their backs, she graciously withdrew her objection; and the motion having been carried with acclamation, we were soon lustily joining in the old familiar airs that were started,—for in the dark every one sang out heartily, apparently oblivious of the fact that, though the blackness of the night might hide their faces from each other's sight, their voices were just as easily detected and recognized, even though some might be so seldom raised in song under ordinary circumstances.

We turned once more into the broad turnpike road, and were bowling along at a spanking pace through a little rural hamlet, where the men—many of them, at least—were still seated upon their doorsteps, staying there, chatting across to one another, long after the red glow had died from the embers in their clay pipes.

And the women and children, too, attracted by the sound of our voices, came running to the threshold, their outlines standing out dark and distinct, in the open doorway, against the faint light of the candle, or the flickering, fitful glow of some tiny fire shedding its cheerful rays upon the walls and floor of the room behind.

"This one must be the last, boys. There, that will do; you must not sing any more, now," said Miss Royce, as the houses gradually began to thicken; and very soon we were driving down the main street of "The Village," as we persisted in calling it, market town though it were, with its Assembly Rooms, its Co-operative Stores, its Circulating Library, Gas-works, Railway Station, and last, though by no means least, its Member of Parliament—in which latter privilege, however, it only possessed an important share, in conjunction with certain other surrounding villages and hamlets.

"What's the matter?" I muttered, sleepily, as Willie Knowles suddenly started bolt upright, almost letting me fall down behind him.

Not receiving any reply, I, too, roused myself, and drawing the shawl more closely round my throat, wondered where we were, and audibly hoped that we had got safely home at last.

But no; we were only stopping for the coachman to speak to some one apparently; and so, with a listless stare up and down the road, I had just prepared to nestle down and make myself comfortable once more, when a few stray words of the conversation caught my ears, and made me wide awake in no time.

Surely that was "Springall Jack" whose name one of them

mentioned—that dreaded, awe-inspiring name, whose very sound was almost enough, now, to conjure up a waking nightmare in my mind.

“So they’ve caught him at last, have they?” I heard our driver say; for, as he leaned over to speak to his friend, I could overhear, distinctly, every word he uttered.

“Yes, that they have. Three of them—peelers, you know,—dressed up as old women, and then, when he showed himself, of course they pretended to be awfully frightened, and ran off in different directions. He chivied one of them, and the other two, dodging round, got behind him and collared him, unawares like.”

“Ah! That was a neat little job!”

“Ay, you’re right there! But they had a fine hard struggle to secure him, I can tell you. Even with the three of them, he nearly got off, they say; he was so tall, and wiry, and so desperate like; then their women’s clothes hampered them, not being used to manage petticoats and shawls, don’t you see? One of them had to draw his truncheon at last, or ‘Springle Jack’ wouldn’t have been in private lodgings at the town’s expense *this* night, I reckon!”

“Ha! ha! You don’t say so? Well, and who has it turned out to be, now that they *have* secured him?”

“Eh, that’s the rub! and more than I can tell you. Why, they haven’t gone into the police station, not scarcely ten minutes ago, and being in the dark, you see, and everything done so completely on the quiet like, there isn’t any one but the officials as has the least idea who it *can* be, and *they* are all just as mum, as,—as,—that there town pump as won’t fetch up the water except by fits and starts, just as it pleases like. And it isn’t for no want of trying to pump it out of ’em, neither, for the news spread just like wild-fire, and there’s a many of the folks as ’ud give their very tongues, a’most, to know the name—only that then they’d lose the pleasure of telling on it. Did you *ever* see the town in such a state of inside-out like?”

"No; that I haven't, not since Lord Brookford came of age, that I can remember; and that's many a long year back, now. Why, there's folks out at every door, and groups under each lamp-post, all the way down the street as we came along."

"What are you stopping so long for, coachman?" inquired Mrs. Royce, impatiently, from the far end of the seat, while I and the boys just round the speakers were listening breathlessly to the recital.

"They have just caught 'Springle Jack,' ma'am!" answered the driver briefly, and turning round with a "See you again presently!" to his informant, he started his horses off at a brisk pace towards home.

A shudder ran through my frame at his words, wrought upon as my nerves were by the exciting conversation I had overheard.

Whilst Mrs. Royce's quick ejaculation of surprise and the boys' more vehement exclamations were producing a confused hubbub around me, I looked involuntarily through the darkness up to the seat where the Scamp was perched. In the gleam of light as we passed a street lamp, I could see that he was turning round towards us, and above the noisy voices I could distinguish in a sort of loud whisper, full of meaning to two of us, the words, "Hist, youngsters, hist!" and I knew that the warning was intended for Harry and me.

In the confusion of dismounting, when the school was at length reached, I was standing patiently waiting to receive something to carry indoors, when I felt a hand upon my arm, drawing me roughly aside.

"Look here, youngster!" said Rogers' voice, in an angry whisper, "you escaped me this afternoon, but I'll pay you out, sooner or later, for your impudence, you little, mean, snivelling sneak! You *tried* to shy that ball at my head; you were glad of an excuse to take it out of me, and make a fool of me before every one, I know you were! And you pretended to

come and make friends with me, when I was bad in bed, indeed! A fine sort of friendship yours is! I was a fool to be taken in by a deceitful jackanapes like you; you who would have laughed and clapped your hands if I had *died*. I know you would!—to come talking a pack of stuff and nonsense to me, about wanting to make friends; faugh! it makes me sick to think of it!”

“Get away, Rogers, will you?” I cried, shaking myself desperately to get free from him; “I’ll call Miss Royce, if you don’t leave me alone,” and the tears came fast springing to my eyes.

“You had better,—little sneak that you are!

“ ‘Tell-tale-tit,
Your tongue shall be slit,
And every little dog
Shall have a little bit.’ ”

And as he spoke, he pinched my arm so viciously that I could have yelled with the agony.

“You call out, or say anything about me to either of them,” he continued, the next instant, “*and I’ll tell about your having gone down to watch Rylands!*”

Out it came, in a long-drawn-out whisper that made me creep in my shoes as I listened. Then he loosed my arm with an angry jerk, and stalked sullenly off towards the porch, where Mrs. Royce stood calling him.

How had he found out? How much did he know? and what would happen if he *should* carry out his threat, and tell Mrs. Royce? Should we be expelled?

And with my mind pondering ceaselessly these knotty questions, I sat down on the hall floor to unlace my boots, but the only conclusion at which my disturbed thoughts could arrive were summed up in the words which I kept repeating, inwardly, over and over again, “Yes, I can’t help it, I do hate him. I can’t like him one bit; I *hate* him, I *HATE* him.”

Every one was in wonderfully high spirits round the table

that night ; for in twenty minutes or so, we were all busily absorbed over a second tea, "just to keep out the cold after our ride," Mrs. Royce said,—every one but Rogers, that is, for he had been banished to his room at once.

"Why, Bernie, boy, the 'dust-man' is filling your eyes already!" said Miss Royce, suddenly catching sight of me, as I sat blinking at the lamp, just like any owl.

"Oh, no, he isn't, Miss Royce!" I said, opening my eyes very wide, and speaking with a solemn gravity that deceived her as well as myself. "I'm not a bit sleepy! I shall have to wear my *grey* 'knickers' to-morrow, shan't I? because there's such a tremendous hole in these. I expect they will never be able to mend them, and then you know I shall only—"

Somehow or other, without a moment's warning, my sudden voluble flow of language dried up, a strange darkness rose up between me and Miss Royce's face, and then, for one brief moment, all my senses seemed to have fled, leaving behind them only a queer sensation of utter blankness ; from which condition I was aroused by the consciousness of strong arms lifting me from my seat, and a laughing voice, just above my head, ringing out, "Just look, Mother! here's a little man so tired out, that he has absolutely gone to sleep in the midst of a brilliant speech, and only just managed to get a piece of cake fixed in between his teeth in time to add effect to the tableau!"

There was a general laugh all round the table, and then I was borne off upstairs to bed. But in spite of this recent curious accomplishment of speaking, eating, and sleeping, all at the same moment, I found myself lying awake, listening uneasily to the loud ticking of the great Dutch clock out on the landing ; for the pendulum, as it swung solemnly to and fro, with a queer catch before every fresh motion, seemed to be echoing loudly, in its own quaint tones, over and over again, those same words which had been running in my head so long "I hate him! I hate him! I hate him!"



CHAPTER XVII.

A SLIP OF THE TONGUE.

THE next morning we were reading aloud in turn from our Bibles, as usual just before breakfast, when a half-stifled exclamation from the Scamp made every one near him turn to look at him. Following the direction of his eyes, we discovered the object of his surprise in the form of a real, live, full-uniformed policeman, who was walking up the carriage-drive with all the dignity pertaining to his class.

So it was with palpitating hearts that two of us, at any rate, took our seats at breakfast; for, as we filed into the dining-room, Harry Morland seized my hand impulsively, and, with an expressive shrug of his shoulders, pointed significantly towards the room where we knew that Mrs. Royce was holding an interview with the policeman.

"Sam, Mat, Harry, and Bernie, you must stay behind; I want to speak to you for a minute or two," said Miss Royce, as she gave the signal for the rest of the boys to rise and leave the table, many of whom turned round at the door to look back at us with an evident air of interest, as much as to say, "*We* know all about it!"

As soon as the last had closed the door after him, she commenced the conversation.

"You have not made very good breakfasts, any of you, in

spite of your turn-out upon the hills yesterday ; were you all overtired ? ”

“ Oh, no, thank you, not a bit,” returned the Scamp, quickly, whilst Harry and I remained silently alarmed at what was, most probably, about to be divulged.

“ You heard what was said about ‘ Springall Jack ’ last night,” continued she, after a brief pause. “ And you know, also, that a policeman has been to see Mrs. Royce this morning.”

I looked up at Sam. He was actually smiling as he nodded assent. Ah ! he could not know that Rogers had found out our secret, and had probably informed Mrs. Royce of our guilt ; and now, most likely, this policeman had been sent to take us up for trespassing on Rylands’ grounds !

“ Well,” proceeded Miss Royce, “ he—whoever he is—is to be brought up before the magistrates this morning, and you four are to go and give your evidence. Come here, Bernie ! you needn’t be so frightened, you know,” and she raised my pale, scared face, and kissed it warmly ; “ it will not be very dreadful. You must just try and recall what happened that evening, and tell the whole truth, simply and openly.”

“ That evening ! ” Then, evidently, she was not yet aware of that second occasion upon which we had seen this strange and hitherto mysterious character.

The court-room was crowded when we arrived, though we were too early, and had to sit through the hearing of a “ drunken ” case, before the event of the morning came on.

It was very trying—this suspense—and the thought of all we had to go through wrought our nerves to the highest pitch of excitement. How cold, and numb, and dead my fingers felt ; and yet my cheeks were burning !

But possibly the enforced delay hardened us a little to our trying position, and took off the edge of the awe-inspiring nature of the place—which was so strange and different to anything we had ever witnessed or experienced before.

"He's coming now!" cried one, as the drunkard was dismissed with a caution, and the next case called on.

"I wonder who he will turn out to be? no one I know, perhaps," remarked another.

"Oh, don't you know? *I* heard an hour ago!" said her neighbour, exaggerating somewhat, in her desire to create a sensation.

"Hush, hush! Here they come!" returned the other, not troubling to listen to what was said. "Who *can* it be, I wonder? Why, it's—yes—no—yes, it is—it's *Rylands*! Did you ever now?" and she turned round with a look of incredulous surprise.

"I could have told you so, only you wouldn't listen," replied her companion, in an offended tone.

After the first stifled burst of surprise and interest that swept over the crowded court as the prisoner entered had somewhat subsided, the spectators gradually settled down, as though expecting a real, good, stirring time, for the next hour or two.

Two or three, however, rushed hastily out, evidently to blaze abroad the news to the less privileged crowd outside, who, unable to gain admission, were impatiently awaiting any stray fragments of news from their more highly favoured friends within; for through an opening door came wafted back to us the sound of loud voices, calling,—

"It's *Rylands*! It's *Rylands*,—the donkey man, you know! That great tall fellow, who goes about with coal!"

"Well, to be sure! whoever would have thought it would be him?"

And then the door swung to again, and the sound of the voices was shut out.

"I really think, sir, I must object to receive the evidence of this little one," said the lawyer who was defending *Rylands*, when at last my turn came, and the Scamp, having been recalled for a few minutes, had gone through a second examination with flying colours, to the vast delight and amusement of the public.

"Surely, Mr. Green, your cause could scarcely be much injured by his appearance in the witness-box ; whilst my brother magistrates agree with me in believing that any additional gleam of light thrown upon this mysterious case would prove beneficial to both parties alike," replied the gentleman appealed to.

"Pardon me, sir," persisted the lawyer, "if I say that I cannot agree with you. Will you kindly allow me to explain, in a few words, my proposed line of defence?—then, I think, you will see that any corroboration of the statements which you have already heard will be, to say the least, unnecessary."

The white-haired, kindly-looking, old gentleman, who occupied the chair, bowed a stiff assent, and Mr. Green proceeded, "My client does not attempt to deny that he was out upon the road last night, dressed in the shawl and boots here produced, and that the opportunity having offered for the commission of a practical joke, he was weak and thoughtless enough to avail himself of it, without having in any way premeditated, or contemplated, any such design as that of systematically and purposely alarming the public, or in any way endangering their safety by any wilful act or deed.

"He does implicitly deny, however, that he is the person who has been maliciously frightening the inhabitants of this district for some weeks past ; and of whom, under the popular title of 'Spring-heeled' or 'Springall Jack,' the most absurd and exaggerated stories have been whispered abroad, to the very great detriment and prejudice of this present case.

"Doubting the possibility of many of these versions, and having possessed himself of the necessary apparatus, he resolved last night to prove for himself the practical correctness, or otherwise, of these idle tales,—with what unfortunate result we all know."

"Stay a moment, Mr. Green," interposed the chairman of the bench, "if this be so, the prisoner can at least inform us from whom he purchased these boots."

Mr. Green looked puzzled, scratched his head, frowned, and fumbled amongst his papers.

Then he sat down, and, leaning over the rail, whispered earnestly to his client.

"The prisoner informs me that his 'rig-out,' as he expresses it, was lent to him by the veritable 'Springall Jack,' whose name he is, in honour bound, unable to betray."

In spite of the terribly vexed face which Mr. Green wore, as he turned away from the prisoner and repeated his answer, I fancied I could detect a momentary twitching of one corner of his mouth, as his eyes met those of the presiding magistrate.

"Indeed!" said that gentleman, drily, passing his hand slowly across his lips, "I fear that so high a sense of honour will not meet, in this particular instance, with the reward it so justly merits. But proceed, sir, if you please."

"The shawl which is lying here, I may remind you, is one belonging to the prisoner's wife; and though, as given in evidence by one of the constables, the strictest investigation of the prisoner's house was immediately made, yet not a trace can be discovered of any cloak, such as several witnesses have described to you as having been worn by 'Springall Jack.' Mrs. Royce's gardener has shown you the portion of cloth which he swears the dog brought to his feet, on the night when these four children were encountered by the original terrifier of the neighbourhood; and I need hardly mention how strong a piece of evidence this would be against the prisoner, could it be traced out; nor, as a corollary, how greatly in his favour it must be deemed to be if—as is the case—his statement cannot be sustained.

"I allow that the prisoner's imprudent conduct has placed him in an awkward position, but I confidently appeal to your fine sense of discernment, to distinguish between the guilt of one who has wantonly frightened certain unprotected people, on the public highway, as a cruel and constant practice; and the indiscretion of the other, who has, for the mere sake of

amusement, indulged for one night in an eccentric freak, in those quiet country lanes where he might reasonably expect to be able to divert himself, after dark, without any expectation of being disturbed, and whose usually deserted condition at night-fall would warrant him in considering himself free from all intrusion.

"Therefore I propose to show, gentlemen, not only that the witnesses are mistaken as to the prisoner's identity with the person seen upon all former occasions, but that his (the prisoner's) whereabouts, on each of the nights in question, can be easily accounted for."

"In that case, Mr. Green," interrupted a magistrate, "it will certainly be to your advantage to examine this little boy here, for if, as you say, the version of these children be not correct, surely some flaw, or inconsistency, in their evidence must crop up to contradict their testimony, especially when examined by you, with an end in view so desirable to your cause."

"Very good, gentlemen," said Mr. Green, rather sharply; for how could he draw back, now, without acknowledging his fears? "I will waive my objection, with pleasure."

"Carter, place a mat for this little gentleman to stand upon, so that we can *see* as well as *hear* him," said the kind old gentleman, smiling.

As I made my way towards the witness-box, I felt something warm and wet touching my hand, and, looking down, discovered that Hero was following at my heels.

John, the gardener, for some reason best known to himself, had brought the dog with him, and having smuggled him unobserved into court, had made him lie quietly at his feet. Up to this moment he had been so obedient and still, that John must have dropped the string fastened to his collar, without noticing it, and Hero, tired of remaining motionless so long, was doubtless glad to avail himself of an excuse for stretching his limbs.

Just as I felt the moist touch of his nose upon my fingers, I

was passing underneath the precise spot where stood the prisoner, only separated from us by the rails marking off the "dock."

Suddenly Hero turned his head with a quick start, and stood perfectly still for a few seconds, sniffing the air uneasily.

Then he gave vent to a long, fierce growl, that made a number of folks rise from their seats with mingled cries of surprise and alarm: and with a single bound, he scrambled nimbly up to the very bar upon which Rylands' hands had been resting, until the moment when so ominous a sound had caused him to shrink hastily back a few paces.

But with an angry shout, John rushed forward, and, seizing the cord, pulled it with a sudden jerk, that brought Hero heavily to the floor again—almost upon my head.

All was confusion and uproar, for though the whole incident had occupied less time than it takes to describe, the excitement it occasioned was some time in subsiding.

The chairman, and one or two of the other magistrates, were downright angry at such an interruption, and scolded John pretty warmly as he dragged Hero, still growling angrily, ignominiously out of the room by the scruff of his neck. One of them, however, regarded it as rather a good joke at the prisoner's expense, and created some little merriment, and a manifestation of applause, by observing, with a humorous twinkle in his eye, when he found what and whose dog it was, that he supposed Mr. Green would be rather pleased than otherwise that, in the present state of the law, the prosecution could not subpoena a dog to give evidence.

The prisoner had grown pale with sudden terror, as Hero's head confronted him, for one instant, full in the face; and well he might, too, after the experience of that night, which we four, at any rate, remembered so vividly.

This unexpected sensation over, the spectators settled down once more, as, with great inward trepidation, I mounted the mat on which I was desired to stand.

"Now, then, sir," began Mr. Green, sharply—evidently he

was becoming more and more vexed as the case proceeded—"You have come here to tell us all about your encounter with 'Springall Jack,' have you not?"

"Yes, sir," I answered, so low that I could scarcely hear myself speak. My cheeks were tingling with shame-faced heat, and my legs trembling beneath me with nervousness and fear, all the more so owing to the recent exciting scene with Hero.

How well I knew that the eyes of that packed crowd to the right were fixed upon me, and their voices making whispered observations upon my personal appearance! while I felt, rather than saw, that Rylands was staring at me, with his dark, scowling face, just as he had scowled at the others, whilst they were giving their evidence.

"Eh?" cried Mr. Green, sharply. "Speak out, my boy, so that every one can hear. You heard what the last witness said, Sam Camp, that is—both when first examined, and when he was recalled?"

Again I replied in a monosyllable, still keeping my eyes fixed fast upon the hand-rail just under my nose.

"And was all that he said quite true? Everything?"

"Yes."

"It was quite dark when you saw this strange being, I think. Too dark to see whether the figure was tall or short, or stout, or thin, or anything—wasn't it?"

"It was tall and thin; I saw it plain enough against the sky, when it jumped over the wall. It was the Lanky Man, I am *sure*. I didn't know it at the time, but I knew him again the moment I saw him the second time."

I pulled up short. "The second time!" What had possessed me? Somehow, I had forgotten the people round, and even the presence of the dreaded man himself, in my earnest protest as to his identity. And now this sudden, unaccountable impulse had doubtless placed me in the dreadful position of a forced betrayer of that secret adventure, which we had pledged ourselves not to divulge to any one.

The titters of the audience—I suppose at my unconscious use of our schoolboy nickname—and the angry stamp of the prisoner, recalled me suddenly to myself—alas ! only too late.

“ ‘The second time’ ? ” repeated the chairman, catching at my words ; “ when was that ? ”

I looked appealingly at the Scamp, but he only stared blankly back at me, his vacant expression gradually melting into a comical combination of pitying surprise and eager interest.

I hesitated, looked down, grew hotter and more fiery red, and felt the tears rising slowly to my eyes ; whilst the spectators, bending anxiously forward, shifted still closer together in their desire to catch what was forthcoming.

“ Come, don’t be afraid, my boy ! ” said the kind old gentleman reassuringly ; “ no one will hurt you for speaking the truth, but you must not try to hide anything, or keep anything back from us.”

“ Please, sir,” I managed to get out at last, “ I quite forgot ; I promised not to say anything.”

“ To whom did you make such a rash promise ? ”

My only answer was to point to Sam, for the tears were coming in such torrents now, that I could not utter a single word more ; and it was with a sob of relief that I turned and fled to Miss Royce, mopping vigorously at my eyes, and trying with all my might to prevent my sobs from becoming audible. For seeing how completely upset I was, the magistrates had ordered the policeman to lift me down from the mat, and had directed Sam to take my place.

“ And so you knew all about this second interview with ‘ Springall Jack,’ and did not tell us anything about it ; how was that ? ” asked Mr. Green, in his most severe manner.

“ Because you didn’t ask me,” said the Scamp, gravely, yet with a defiant air.

“ Then why did you not volunteer the statement ? ”

“ Didn’t care about getting into a row ; but I don’t mind, now that it has all come out.”

"In what way would you be implicated, I should like to know?"

"Well, I was off the premises without leave, and they've got awfully strict rules about that, up there," and Sam cast a covert glance in the direction of Miss Royce, to see what sort of an impression his revelation was producing upon her.

"Who were with you upon this occasion?"

"Just the same as before, except Mat—Mat's too good to do anything of that sort, so I didn't ask him—(here the audience began to titter again)—but Harry and Bernard Ayres were there."

I half expected that Miss Royce would have loosed my trembling hand at this, but no! she held it all the more firmly, and placed her other arm gently round my waist as I sat beside her.

"Well, and what sort of view did you get of him?" inquired Mr. Green, after Sam had stated what had occurred upon the evening in question. "Was your impression, this time, that he was a man resembling Rylands?"

"I should rather think it was!" said the Scamp, beginning to laugh; but the chief magistrate held up a warning finger, and, shaking his head, told Sam to remember where he was, and upon what a serious matter he was engaged.

This rather awed the Scamp, and he proceeded somewhat more quietly,—

"Why it was broad daylight don't you know?—at least it was in the evening—and we saw him go into his shed and watched him take those boots out of a hiding-place and then begin to jump about right over those donkeys of his and I expect that's where he keeps that cloak and if you like I could show any one the very spot."

There was an excited murmur of astonishment all over the room, as Sam went running on, regardless of stops, rising to such a pitch as the interest increased, that the police had to threaten to turn out sundry offenders, who paid no heed

to their continued cries of "Hush! Hush!" or "Silence, there!"

A fierce, angry stamp, from those restless feet in the dock, indicated, plainly enough, the rage and annoyance of the prisoner, at this fresh and most conclusive phase in the evidence against him.

And so, little by little, with a question here and a suggestion there, the lawyers engaged upon the case contrived to worm out from the Scamp the whole story of our disobedience on that adventurous night, until, when the recital was ended, Mr. Green's case seemed to have grown as hopeless and desperate as it was possible for it to be.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BITER BITTEN.

WHAT a relief it was to get out into the cool refreshing air once more, after the stifling atmosphere of the heated court !

"Committed for trial ; bail refused," were the words being bandied from mouth to mouth, as we passed through the various groups scattered thickly upon the pavements and in the roadway, discussing the all-absorbing topic of the day.

"What's the verdict ?" eagerly inquired a coachman, as he pulled up his horse for a brief moment, and having received an answer, couched in the same concise terms as above, away he started again, shouting and gesticulating wildly at the numbers of people in his road, who seemed too much engrossed in hearing the fullest details of the case to trouble about their personal safety.

But the greatest difficulty was to squeeze, one after the other, through the dense numbers surrounding the doors, for each one was recognized as we slowly made our way into the street, and many were the outspoken remarks concerning us that reached our ears. Sam was evidently the hero of the day, and once or twice was checked in his course by some admirer, who was anxious to display a mark of his or her approving favour, by a hearty shake of the hand, or a friendly pat on the back. And though the hands might be grimy, and not particularly light, yet the Scamp was proud of the distinction, and

walked a little way in advance of us, with his head held high, and the expression on his face of one who is thoroughly conscious of having played an important part with the greatest possible credit to himself.

Nevertheless, and in spite of so much having occurred that would have set our tongues rattling fast enough in the usual way, we were all very quiet as we walked homewards.

Perhaps our spirits were weighed down by the thought of the detected secret, which had been so unexpectedly brought to light that morning; for, in spite of the admiration of our conduct, which had been so openly expressed in certain quarters, we knew that in other minds this exposure would be regarded in a very different light.

Well, though the disgrace were deep, at any rate it would be a relief to have nothing now to conceal, with the accompanying dread continually haunting us of some chance word, inadvertently dropped, that might have unconsciously betrayed us. Moreover, Rogers' threat would be powerless for evil now, and that, in itself, was no slight satisfaction.

"He must have been awake that night when we were talking about it," Harry had said, after I had recounted to him Rogers' angry threat, and had expressed my astonishment at his having learnt our secret. "Certainly, he didn't answer, when I asked him if he were awake, and we didn't speak at all loud, did we? Still he *might* have overheard, sleeping next to us."

It was long past the usual dinner-hour by the time we reached home, and yet, when we sat down to the viands that had been put by and kept warm for us, I don't think any one of us managed to make much of a meal. Even the Scamp, who on his way from the village had declared himself "ravenously hungry," was forced to acknowledge himself beaten, and to confess that, somehow or other, even his ordinary portion was too much for him.

So that with our desire to escape from the restraint of all

controlling influences, it was with a sensation of grateful relief that we received the signal to rise and leave the room.

Our usual night work consisted of a partial preparation of the following day's lessons ; but this evening, instead of the customary sign to take out our books, orders were issued that we were to range ourselves in a certain position always adopted when any address from the desk was to be delivered.

Then, to-night, for a wonder, Mrs. Royce herself was presiding at the place of command, an omen in itself that some event of more than ordinary interest and importance was about to take place. As soon as certain rows of boys had turned round, in order that all should face the same way, a dead silence succeeded the momentary bustle—a stillness so profound that we could hear the ticking of the clock at the far end of the room as loudly and distinctly as possible.

As ill-luck would have it, at that very moment some one, taking out his pocket-handkerchief, whisked out with it more than he bargained for ; for with a distinctness that seemed quite unnatural, a marble, which had somehow contrived to entangle itself in its folds, dropped sharply on to the floor, and with an amount of deliberation that really sounded quite reckless, rolled slowly across the bare boards, away towards the farthest corner of the room. Never, I should think, did any marble accomplish so long a journey with such apparent ease and lack of hindrance. Surely, under any other circumstances, it would have made straight for the leg of one of the forms, and stopped there ; or been suddenly checked by one of the many feet in front and on all sides of it. But to-night, of all times, when every revolution was followed with such breathless interest, it rolled steadily on and on, threading its way in and out amongst all obstacles, with a degree of dexterity that was positively marvellous. Every one was in too great a state of suspense, from dread of the unknown fate hanging over him, to laugh, or even to ask in a whisper of his neighbour, whoever the unhappy owner of the marble could be. We only sat listening, in a

curious state of awed surprise at the fact of any body—inanimate or otherwise—having the audacity to break in upon the expectant stillness, with sounds so irrelevant to the solemnity of the occasion.

Mrs. Royce took one hasty glance round, either to try and discover the culprit, or else to satisfy herself that no one was attempting to convert the occurrence into an excuse for unseasonable levity. But not the suspicion of a smile lurked upon any face that I could see, though certainly the Scamp was seated with his back to me, and he was the only one unlikely to be too much awed to study his personal gravity.

The sound of the rolling marble grew gradually fainter and fainter as the speed became slower, and presently died away altogether. Not until perfect and absolute silence reigned once more, did Mrs. Royce commence the "lecture," which we all knew, by past experience, was impending.

"I have set aside your usual duties to-night, boys," she began, "in order that I may take the earliest opportunity which offers, of addressing you all together upon a subject which has recently occupied so much of your time and attention, as well as my own."

And then, after a few further preliminary remarks, she reviewed in detail all the events which had taken place in connexion with "Springall Jack" and ourselves, from the time when we had first encountered him, up to the scene at which we had assisted this morning.

"I want to point out to the entire school," she proceeded, "how entirely it was owing to a simple act of disobedience, in not coming straight home from Mrs. Hughes', as they were told to do, that these four boys fell victims to this bad man's wicked and heartless method of amusing himself at the expense of other people. It is scarcely necessary, now, to point out the various forms which their disobedience assumed, for you are all perfectly well aware that had any of your teachers been present, they would not have been permitted to loiter beside the mill-

stream as they did, whilst Sam's dangerous and silly freak of attempting to cross the bridge would probably never have been conceived, and most certainly would never have been carried out. Now what you know would be prohibited by Miss Royce or Miss Baxter, you must be well aware is wrong when left to yourselves, and placed upon your honour, as these boys were; and it has grieved me more than I can tell you, to remember that, for the present at any rate, I shall feel quite unable to place that confidence in them which I had done formerly—in one or two cases more particularly.”

I darted a quick look at Mat.

Evidently this last remark was an allusion to him, and so he felt it, I am sure, for there he sat whimpering quietly to himself, though so anxious to avoid showing his emotion, that he steadily refused to use his handkerchief, even when the tears came dropping slowly off his shiny red cheeks on to his folded hands, with a continuous drip, drip, drip, that left no doubt as to the disturbed state of his feelings.

He brightened up a bit presently, however, for Mrs. Royce, apparently noticing how much he took her words to heart, began to make some consoling remarks to the effect that perhaps, in this instance, sheer thoughtlessness had been more the parent of disobedience than actual wilfulness.

“Still you know, boys,” she added, “under certain conditions, thoughtlessness and forgetfulness may become grievous faults, productive of as grave and evil consequences as direct disobedience.”

The Scamp, on his part, on hearing his great, and in his eyes, glorious, achievement contemptuously condemned as a “dangerous and silly freak,” turned violently red, and with a curious kind of writhe upon his seat, looked up first at Mrs. Royce, and then round about upon the faces of his companions, with a half-incredulous, half-injured air, which seemed to say, “Well, I never! Pretty cool, that, isn't it? What'll she say next, I wonder?”

"Before I finish what I have to say," Mrs. Royce went on, "there is one mistaken impression which I desire to remove from your minds, and that is the opinion, which I fear some of you hold, that Sam Camp is to be looked up to somewhat in the light of a hero, or of an example worthy of your imitation."

At this further attack, poor Sam winced again upon his form, in the same queer, jerky fashion peculiar to himself. Certainly, it was pretty plain speaking, but I suppose Mrs. Royce had her reasons for saying all this in his presence ; at any rate, he was destined, before she finished, to hear a good deal more in the same strain.

"There is no doubt that Sam has proved himself, to-day, to be a sharp and intelligent boy," proceeded Mrs. Royce, with as much unconcern as though the Scamp had been miles away, "and that is just the very reason why it is so necessary to guard you from taking a false view of his conduct. I have noticed that, like the public generally, you have regarded Sam, to-day, as one who has greatly distinguished himself, by being instrumental in bringing home the guilt upon a scoundrel who richly deserved his exposure. But do not forget that he has thereby convicted *himself* of having committed a gross breach of the strictest rules of this school, and, what is worse, of having persuaded two of his young companions to join in his misconduct. Then, too, I hold him chiefly responsible for the misbehaviour on the day upon which you visited Mrs. Hughes—of which I have already spoken. Instead of setting a good example to the other boys, I fear he was the chief cause of their lingering beside the mill-stream to play, and you all know how nearly his foolish rashness cost him his life. But I am inclined to think that the events of to-day will leave an impression upon the minds of those concerned, as lasting and effectual as any further scolding or punishment might do which I should have otherwise felt it my duty to inflict upon them. So that, after to-night, at the special request of Miss Royce, I have promised to allow the matter to drop ; only warning you, that if any such

case happens again, the offenders must plead no excuse, that, because of my present leniency, they imagined I should not be likely to adopt a rigid course of punishment next time."

A very sheepish lot we all felt as we filed off to our bedrooms, soon after this harangue was ended.

Harry and I, as chief culprits, had long since been keeping Mat company with our tears, and even Sam was too much depressed by the sweeping censure pronounced upon his conduct to mutter any of those rebellious, pouting grunts of disapproval, by which he generally relieved his feelings after they had suffered an outrage which he could not openly resent.

The following evening, having recovered the greater part of our usual spirits, he and I were assisting in the kitchen, during the preparations for tea. That is to say, Sam was engaged in baking toast before a bright fire, whilst I sat upon the table swinging my legs, and idly looking on.

Mrs. Royce had hesitated somewhat at first, when we had begged for this privilege, but presently, relaxing the gravity of her face a little, she said, "Well, I promised to say nothing more about past matters, so I suppose I must keep my word, and treat you just like every one else."

So, having got through my share of the bread to be toasted, I was resting from my labours, and watching Sam in a listless fashion, as he took up my vacated position on the hearth-rug.

"Here!" said Anne, suddenly breaking the silence with this one short word.

She startled me a little, for I was half absorbed in a reverie, just at that moment, but turning sharply round to see the reason for her exclamation, I found that she was holding towards me a piece of buttered toast, so fresh and hot from the baking that the thick-spread butter had melted into numerous creamy pools, more pleasing to the senses of a hungry schoolboy than it would have been to any one arrived at years of maturity.

"Oh, *thanks!*" I exclaimed, taking the proffered gift eagerly; and the emphasis with which I spoke, testified to the sincerity of my gratitude more plainly than many words.

Nothing further passed between us, only as my teeth closed over the delicious morsel, I sank back into the same train of thought from which her voice had roused me.

Before long my reflections found relief in words.

"Anne," I said, my mouth rather awkwardly full, and my cheeks doing their best to turn a shade deeper red than the fire had already left them, "Anne, do you know I'm quite afraid to go outside the gates, especially into the village, for fear Mrs. Rylands should see me."

"An' what if she did?"

"Oh, I thought,—I thought, maybe, she would be so angry with us—about her husband, you know, because we helped to put him in prison, you see, and don't you think if she caught any of us she would be ready to—"

I paused; I couldn't think of anything she would be likely to do, to meet the seriousness of the case, short of almost killing us.

"Bless the child!" exclaimed Anne, laughing. "She 'ud be ready to hug you a'most. Why, there hasn't such a stroke of good fortune happened to her, not since the day that she was married. The only pity is that he'll be out again,—if they gives him the longest time they can, at the 'sises,' he'll be out again afore she's got fairly used to the comfort and quiet of being without him. She was up here with some wood fagots, just afore you came out of school, an' I don't know when I've seen her so jolly and lively. She's written right off to her son to come back home again from Bristol. He's been away these two year. He an' his father were always quarrellin' so fearfully, that at last he was turned out of the house—an' it was all along of his not bein' able to stand quietly by an' see his mother knocked about so, after he was growed up big and strong enough to defend her.

"Poor thing! she have missed him, too, an' no mistake! for a right-down good son he's been to her. She *will* be glad to have him home again, just about."

Anne grew so excited and eager over her recital of the Rylands' family history, that I strongly suspect there was some one else, beside the mother, who would be only too pleased to welcome home the wandering son and heir.

Sam turned round to listen with great interest, as soon as he heard about the son daring the father to touch his mother.

"And won't the donkeys be glad, eh?" he said, his eyes twinkling merrily; "if their bodies were only as light as their spirits, they would feel inclined to jump over their new master's head, just as the old one used to over theirs."

"Just look at your toast, Master Sam,—it's all of a blaze!" interrupted Anne, in a tone of horrified alarm.

"Oh, no matter!" responded the Scamp, coolly, attempting to ward off Anne, as she came hurrying up to the rescue. "I'll soon blow it out. Besides, Miss Royce will like it all the better, for she said, the other day, that you couldn't bake it too black to suit her: so it will just be a beautiful tit-bit for her!"

In his desire to prevent Anne from assisting with the extinguishing of the flames, Sam had turned his back upon her, and consequently upon the door communicating with the passage, at which, that very moment, Miss Royce had unexpectedly appeared. Anne and I caught sight of her directly, and found the utmost difficulty in checking our laughter, as we saw that she stood still to catch what Sam was saying, an amused smile hovering round her lips as she beckoned to us not to betray her presence by our mirth. I tried to cram my last remaining morsel of hot toast into my already overfull mouth, in the deluded hope that I might thereby avoid being discovered munching what—if not forbidden—was, at any rate, an unauthorized dainty; but though I almost choked myself in the attempt to make full fuller, I have a distinct impression that as she looked across at me, her left eye closed and opened

again meaningly, in a way which, in any one less dignified, would have been at once set down as a very knowing wink.

"And so you conclude that as long as you produce the same effect, it is of no consequence whether you *bake* or *burn* it black,—is that your idea, Sam?"

You should have seen how Sam jumped, as soon as he heard himself addressed,—“just as though he'd been shot,” as Anne said.

“I didn't mean to do it,” stammered Sam; “it caught of itself,—it did, indeed. But I thought it wouldn't matter, 'cause I've heard you say you didn't mind how black it was,” and he looked up into Miss Royce's face, with a comical expression of fear and amusement upon his own. “If you like, I'll make another piece, instead.”

“No, indeed, I shouldn't like to trust you!” replied Miss Royce, dryly.

Then, without any further remark, she took the fork away from him, broke off a large corner of the charred toast, and spreading over it a moderately thick coating of butter, presented it to him, saying, “Here you are, Sam! If you can so highly recommend it to me, I am sure you must be longing to try a bit yourself, so I will make you a present of this little piece.”

Sam took it with a sheepish air, for though he knew that Miss Royce was only doing it for the sake of teasing him, he did not quite like to refuse.

Placing it gingerly between his teeth, he bit off a small corner and began to scrunch it up. The next moment, with a cry of intense disgust, he was bounding nimbly across the floor to the back kitchen, flinging down the untasted portion as he sped past the table, with an emphatic gesture of abhorrence that expressed his opinion as to its merits, quite as strongly as the words which he was unable to utter could possibly have done.



CHAPTER XIX.

PICKLES.

ONE Saturday afternoon, soon afterwards, we were given permission to go blackberrying, and highly pleased we were, too, to avail ourselves of the opportunity. We were hastily running to and fro to get ready, and to collect the necessary baskets, when I noticed Mat running up to Miss Royce, and heard him say, "Oh, if you please, Miss Royce, *may* I take Billy with us?"

Miss Royce looked down upon the earnest, pleading, little face with a reflective expression on her own.

"You can't pick blackberries and attend to Billy too."

"Oh yes, I can. I'll take the reins, you know, and fasten them round my arm when I'm picking, then he can't stray."

"Very well, I have no objection; only what will Hero say to the arrangement? for you certainly can't go running after him as well."

"Hero won't mind," laughed Mat. "Why, they are as good friends as possible, and they've been out together scores of times; you know that quite well, Miss Royce," he continued, wondering at her having raised such an objection.

"I merely meant that Hero will become jealous, perhaps; for of course the largest share of your divided attention will have to be bestowed upon Billy."

"Yes, I know that,—but he won't mind," reiterated Mat. "He often comes and walks beside him, when we are out for a

walk : perhaps he thinks Billy must feel lonely since poor old Nanny died."

So Mat gained his point, and, calling to me to come and help him, ran swiftly out of doors, and away to the little green at the back of the house, to unloose Billy from the stout iron rod to which he was tethered.

Billy was no other than a favourite white goat, of so gentle a disposition, and such beautiful form, that he was firmly established as one of the prime pets of the school. He was lying quietly down upon the grass as we approached, but as soon as he caught sight of us, he wriggled himself hastily to his feet, and ran quickly towards us, with a plaintive little bleat of expectancy and pleasure.

But very soon the length of his tether pulled him up with a sudden jerk that almost sent him reeling, and then, wheeling round in a small uncertain circle, he strained and tugged at his chain with so much impatient vigour, that any weaker tie than that which kept him fastened within his appointed limits, would have snapped asunder directly.

Mat patted him affectionately, and in his own funny manner began to tell him of his good fortune in being taken for a run; a piece of news which Billy seemed to understand and appreciate at once, judging by the way in which he whisked his short, wiry tail about, and the restless attempts he kept making to set off, before Mat had had time to unfasten his collar.

"Hold him, half a minute, Bernie, while I slip the reins on; be quiet, Billy, do!" cried Mat in the same breath to both of us.

Then he lightly placed one leg across his back, so as to get at him better, as he said, and very soon Billy was fully harnessed with the light pair of strong leather reins which Mat had brought for his better control.

We usually equipped him in this fashion when we took him out—it was such fun driving him; perhaps that was the chief reason, but then it really saved a deal of trouble in looking after him, for, if left to himself, he was sure to go scampering

on ahead, and was certain to take the wrong turning whenever he got the chance, and so lead us a long chase all for nothing, or else he would lag far behind, to feast upon the rich herbage growing so profusely along the banks of these country lanes, obliging some one constantly to go back and hurry him on.

Away he ran, as soon as he felt himself free, and though we both caught hold of the reins, he tugged so hard that I thought I should be forced either to leave go, or else to tumble down from sheer inability to run so fast. But Mat cheered me on, and in another minute we were standing hot, and breathless, before the front door, having succeeded, with the utmost difficulty, in compelling the excited creature to come to a brief standstill for a moment, whilst Mat ran indoors to fetch his basket.

"Oh, Mat! come quick! come quick—*quick!*" I cried, anxiously, for Billy, perceiving at once that the hold on the reins was less firm than before, seized the opportunity of moving on, in spite of my most determined efforts to prevent him.

By the time that Mat had come to my assistance, the animal had dragged me right down to the very entrance gates. Fortunately, these were closed, so Billy was forced to restrain his impatience, for they were too high to jump, and the rails were too close together to creep through.

"I couldn't hold him in a bit!" I said, feeling rather crest-fallen at having been dragged so far against my will. "He's such a tremendously strong creature."

"Yes, he *is* getting strong," replied Mat, as he patted Billy, with as much pride as though the remark had been a personal compliment paid to himself. "But you aren't strong enough for *that* yet, old boy!" he added reprovingly, for Billy was making a vain attempt to burst open the gates with his prettily-curved horns.

Once out in the lanes, his behaviour grew more quiet; there was so much that claimed attention on each side of the road,

that ultimately the difficulty was to get him along, rather than to keep him back, as it had been hitherto. But at any rate it gave us more breathing time, and afforded me the opportunity of inquiring from Mat the history and particulars of the "Nanny" whom I had heard him mentioning to Miss Royce just now.

"Oh, don't you know about her? Haven't you ever heard of her? How funny! Ah, I suppose it must have happened before you came. I remember, now; you didn't come till about a month after the holidays were over, did you? And this took place almost directly after we got back. I expect every one took it for granted that everybody knew, and so no one ever told you!" and Mat chuckled a little at this last remark.

"What was it, then?" I asked, rather impatiently.

"I'll tell you. Some one—her uncle, I believe—sent Miss Royce a pair of dear little kids, for a present. They came all the way from Scotland in a hamper, and fine fun it was unpacking them, too. One was all white—that's Billy—but the other had some great blotches of brown all over her head and body; still, she was very pretty, *almost* as nice as he is: and Miss Royce said we would call them Billy and Nanny,—she liked those better than fancy names like Beauty and Grace, as Miss Baxter wanted to have them, and so do I, don't you?"

"Yes," I murmured, but Mat didn't appear to expect me to make any reply, and went on,—

"Well, they soon made friends with us, and grew like anything, both of them, and we used to drive them about in pairs, and it was real grand, I can tell you.

"But one day, just after dinner, the Scamp was first up in the playground, and he noticed that Billy had broken his cord, and was tearing all over the place, just like a mad thing. He and Nanny had both been fastened to the hedge as usual, so that they could find plenty of green things to nibble at.

"But Nanny wasn't to be seen anywhere, so Sam ran to the place where she had been tied, and there he noticed hundreds and hundreds of wasps flying all about. But he didn't care,

and in he pushed into the hedge, to see whether she had got through into the field beyond, and there, sure enough, was poor Nanny, lying on her side upon the bank, covered with a mass of angry wasps, for in scrambling through in search of fresh fodder, she had stepped right into a wasp's nest, and my goodness ! they did pay her out, and no mistake !

"Some of the other boys had come up by then, but though every one was in a fine way about her, not one would get over to help the Scamp lift her up.

"So Sam pushed his way back through the hedge again, and rushed off as hard as he could go to give the alarm, and it wasn't long before Mrs. Royce and John, and the servants, and all, were hurrying up after him. John and he, with Anne's help, soon managed to get poor Nanny back into the playground, and though Anne got stung right on her mouth, so that her lip swelled up, afterwards, nearly as big as a pigeon's egg, she never uttered a sound, nor said anything about it, until everything had been done for the animal that could be.

"They threw buckets of water all over her—Nanny, I mean, not Anne !—and, after they had got all the insects off her, laid her down upon a bed of clean, dry hay, out in the wood-house : but it was all of no use, and she seemed to be suffering such agonies, and so nearly dead, that Mrs. Royce gave orders to have her killed, if she weren't better by evening. Poor old Billy, too, had been stung, but he didn't seem to think any more about himself than Anne did of herself ; but came and stood by me, looking on at all that was going on, and watching his poor little partner, with such sad, pitying eyes, just as though he knew all about everything, and could understand John, when he shook his head and said he 'didn't believe as there were any more 'ope for 'er than for the pig as was goin' to be stuck to-morrer.'

"Mrs. Royce has had her head stuffed since, and her skin made into a mat : that's it at the drawing-room door, and you must have noticed the head hanging up in the hall ?"

"Oh yes, I know," I answered; "only of course, never having known about it, I haven't noticed them much. I shall look at them again, when we get back."

This little account of Mat's had interested me so much, that I had scarcely noticed how quickly we had got over the ground, by dint of alternately walking and running, and now, as we turned a corner, we caught sight of the long row of boys, only a few yards in front of us.

"Let's walk slowly, so as not to overtake them; then we shan't have to fall into the ranks," I said, in a cautiously low tone to Mat, as though it were possible that Miss Royce might overhear us even at that distance.

The place that we had been brought to was, without doubt, a most delightful spot in our juvenile estimation.

A broad brook ran through the centre of the wide waste of wild land, into which a number of tiny tributaries flowed on either side. And each of these having worn for itself a deep, narrow bed, the result was a series of diminutive hillocks, separated from each other by gorges so deep that the paths led quite precipitously down to the water's edge, before one crossed the rivulets to begin the ascent of the equally steep inclines upon the other side of the valleys.

Then the foliage, if not large-sized, was, at any rate, dense and thick; for blackberry-bushes, nut-trees, elders, and various other large shrubs, flourished profusely, whilst a few stunted oak-trees were to be met with here and there, and were eagerly sought after by many of the boys, for the sake of the stray acorns and gall-nuts which they bore.

Occasionally, too, in pushing through the entangling depths of the luxuriant undergrowth, a pheasant's or a partridge's nest was discovered, and great was the excitement when the sudden bustle and disturbance had once startled a hare from his comfortable afternoon nap in his lair, and sent him bounding across the grass to escape to a safer hiding-place elsewhere.

The blackberries were abundant, and very soon most of the

baskets were nearly full, for with so many willing helpers, it did not take long to gather enough to fill them to the brim, even stopping every now and then to satisfy one's own desires as well.

Mat and I were busily engaged in picking from a bush bearing some particularly fine berries, upon which we had lighted quite unexpectedly, when the sounds of our delighted exclamations drew the Scamp's attention to our whereabouts.

"Well, you *are* a fright, Sam! Just look at him, Mat!" I cried, as his face was seen peering across at us, from over the other side of the bush.

"Am I? You're another!" was Sam's polite rejoinder. Then, in a more serious tone, he added, "I always do manage to get into a pickle, no matter what I'm about. It don't seem to make any odds, however much I try to keep clean and tidy; it's just the same, Sundays and all. I'm sure I never do anything different from any one else, and yet, by the time we get back from church, Mrs. Royce is safe to pitch into me for being so dirty and untidy."

"Blackberry pickle is something new, isn't it?" said Mat, in his dry, quiet way, that somehow had the effect of making the mildest remarks sound droll when they came from him. "I've heard of blackberry jam, and blackberry pudding, but never of blackberry pickle. You ought to take out a patent for it: it might sell well, and then you would make your fortune, and wouldn't have to take to rat-catching;"—for this was what Sam always declared he should have to fall back upon as a profession, when every other means of earning a livelihood failed, through his inability to wrestle with their intellectual difficulties.

"Well, 'tisn't new to me," retorted he, shortly, and without deigning to take any further notice of this sally, he went on with the original subject of his grievances.

"Why, now," he said, "I'll bet you ten 'bulls' eyes' to an acid drop that I haven't eaten a dozen more blackberries than either of you two."

"Well, your looks aren't much in your favour, that's certain," I returned, laughing; "for if you had swallowed a whole basketful, your lips and teeth couldn't be much blacker, and as for your cheeks, they look just as though you had been squeezing a lot of berries in your hand, and had then smeared them all over on purpose."

"I know what!" cried Mat, merrily; "he has been reading about the ancient Britons staining themselves with woad, and he's been trying to imitate them in 'blackberry pickle,' to try what it feels like!"

Willie Knowles and Harry Morland had strayed up to us just at this point, and the former, shaking his fist at the Scamp, chimed in to the conversation.

"That's just what he has been doing, Mat; and it reminds me, old boy,"—turning again to Sam—"that I owe you a grudge for the row you very nearly got me into over that little affair."

"We were reading over our history lesson to ourselves," Willie proceeded to explain, for the benefit of us three youngsters, who, being in a junior class, had been away in another room at the time. "Sam sits next to me, you know, and when he came to that part about the way in which the ancient Britons used to dress—"

"In blue 'tights,' you know," interrupted Sam, with a broad grin, as he threw his head back, and chucked another blackberry down his throat, to keep company with the scores of its kindred that had gone before.

"Used *not* to dress, you mean," put in Mat.

"Well," continued Willie, after a brief chuckle of amusement at Sam's interruption, "when I got there, I poked my 'Markham' under his nose, and, pointing to the descriptive lines, whispered, 'Don't you wish Mrs. Royce would let us go about like that in summer? How jolly and cool it would be! eh?' Sam went off into one of his fits directly; you know how he bursts out, particularly when you don't want him to, and the sort of suppressed snort he gave, brought Miss Baxter down upon

us in a jiffy. She saw him splitting, for he was nearly choking, through wanting to laugh and yet trying to smother it down, and I expect she guessed what it was about, for of course she was reading over the lesson herself. At any rate, she called out to know what it was we were laughing at. I didn't answer at first, but this old Scamp blurted out in a moment, 'Why, he says he wishes Mrs. Royce would let us go about in summer like the ancient Britons used to.' Of course that set every one off in a titter, and Miss Baxter, I know, was furious; but then she couldn't say anything, for he had only obeyed her orders in repeating it, and after all there was no harm in what I said.

"But she kept us both in afterwards—'for talking in school,' she said; though I know, if she hadn't felt in a kind of fix, she would have let us off all right."

"And a jolly good 'jaw' she gave us too,—all about how ashamed we ought to be to set such an example to all you little jackanapes," added the Scamp, tweaking my nose with a patronizing air, as he passed on, to pick away at a fresh cluster of berries that he had espied close by.

"I tell you what!" exclaimed Willie, seized with a sudden inspiration, "we'll go and wash the Scamp's face in the Brook Kidron; I'm perfectly ashamed to be seen in the company of such a parti-coloured nigger."

And suiting the action to the word, he took Sam by the shoulders, and pushing him in front of him, set off at a brisk trot down the steep slope to the little brook, which had worn so deep and narrow a channel for itself as it went leaping and tumbling along down to the main stream a short distance off, known amongst us by no less imposing a name than the "River Jordan." These names for the various brooks had been a tradition in the school long before even he came, Willie Knowles said, and Miss Royce herself, he added, knew them by none other, though who invented them, or whether these were their proper names, she could not tell.

We soon reached the "Fords," where there was a stepping-

stone or two placed for those who were not sufficiently agile to jump across, though any of *us* would have scorned to use such assistance. Behind these stones, a little basin of clear water was formed by their sudden opposition to the running stream.

Here we all sat down; Harry and I amusing ourselves by hanging our feet over the edge of the bank, and trying how dexterously we could skim the water with our feet, without letting it actually wash over our boots. It was regular small-boys' fun, and there is no telling how thoroughly we should have succeeded in soaking our feet, at the probable risk of catching severe colds, had not Johnnie Harris suddenly appeared on the brow of the hill behind us, calling to us that it was time to go, and that we were to "Come on at once" to the rallying-point.

"Miss Royce has left her whistle at home, so she has had to send some of us out as scouts," he shouted.

Willie was lying full length upon the short mossy turf, watching his namesake Billy, as he scrunched away at a small branch he held out to him, tantalizing the goat, every now and then, by suddenly jerking it away from between his lips, just as he was beginning to nibble, after having daintily sniffed it all over, leaf by leaf. Mat, too, was engrossed with his favourites' concerns, dividing his attention between Hero and Billy, with an amount of impartiality that would have done credit to many an older and wiser head than his; so that Harry and I were left to work our own sweet wills with regard to the dabbling process undisturbed; and it was only when Sam, hearing the summons to go, rose from his knees, to scrub away at his dripping face with his pocket-handkerchief, that our amusement was observed by a third party.

"Oh, you little geese!" he cried; "wouldn't Miss Royce give it you if she caught you! My word! your feet will be as wet as sponges. What on earth put you up to that game?"

We both rose, rather shamefaced at having been caught in a trick so foolish that even the Scamp saw fit to lecture us, and

muttering something about the water not having got through our boots, we picked up our basket, and began to ascend the path with as much apparent indifference as we could command.

"You see it's one thing to soak your feet with your shoes and socks *off*, as you've seen me do pretty often, I guess, and quite another to do it with them *on*," continued Sam, launching his remarks at our backs, as we hurried on, pretending not to hear them.

"And it would be different, too, if it were a fine, hot, summer's day," quoth Willie, who was following next in order in the Indian file, as we wound up the narrow pathway between the bushes.

"What a fuss they make about nothing! I suppose, if we didn't find the water too cold for bathing, it would be nothing to them if we had chosen to get right in," Harry said, with more sulkiness in his tone than point in his remark, for we were both feeling cross at the ruthless way in which our thoughtless amusement had been condemned.

"And fancy the Scamp, above every one, setting up for a preacher!" I added, in a voice which I half feared, and half hoped, might reach that young gentleman's ears.

Miss Royce, we found, had started, but two or three other boys joined us at the stile, and as we were not expected to fall into rank on our way home, we sauntered slowly along in the wake of the others, comparing the relative weights and proportions of our baskets of fruit, and exchanging opinions as to where the finest berries were to be found.

Harry and I soon managed to get over our fit of the blues, for it was impossible to be angry long with a fellow like the Scamp, who would come up to you five minutes after he had been having a quarrel, and talk away just as though nothing had happened, and you had been fast friends all the time; only that, if anything, he seemed to be all the kinder and nicer for a while, after such a breeze, than he had been previously.



CHAPTER XX.

"WHAT'S IN A NAME?"

BEFORE long we came upon a row of boys sprawling in a variety of attitudes over a low stone wall, which marked the boundary-line of a large apple and plumb orchard, belonging to a small farm-house standing a short distance back from the road.

"What's up?" inquired Willie, as we all ran towards them; and setting down our basket, Harry and I hastily scrambled up the loose stones, and looked over.

On that side of the wall the land was lower than on this, and upon the ground down below, we soon discovered the reason of the boys loitering here.

Down upon the ground below us, we saw great heaps of golden, rosy-cheeked apples, piled high under the trees, looking wonderfully tempting to the eyes of a hungry schoolboy, upon their bright green setting of fresh, velvet-like grass.

An old man, dressed in a long, rather dirty, white smock frock, a pair of brown leather gaiters, and an old slouch "Jim Crow" hat, with the brim turned down all round, pulled tight over his head and ears, supporting his feeble steps by the long, crooked stick he carried in his hand, had tottered across from the farm-yard, as soon as he saw the line of boys fringing his wall, and heard their loud voices eagerly discussing his fruit.

"I say, give us one—there's a good old fellow!" Willie called out to him, with a sort of mock plaintiveness in his tone, evidently not expecting that his request would be granted.

But the old man stooped down, chose five or six of the largest and rosiest from the heap of apples, and tossing one first to Willie, with a good-humoured smile upon his dry, wrinkled, old face, sent the others hap-hazard amongst the rest of us.

"Thur!" he said, with a funny kind of chuckle; "gie a bit to each on 'un—little 'uns and all. If ere a one on ee's tasted anythink ckal to they, I'll gie the 'ole lot on 'em to ee,—thur noo!"

"Where's Miss Royce?" cried the Scamp, eagerly, as he munched away at his share of the scramble, evidently with vast relish. "I'll cut after her to know if we may buy some; they're just splendid!"

"Smedley's gone already!" cried one or two, and almost directly after, Johnnie Harris called out,—

"And here he is coming back, too."

"Well?" was the impatient interrogation from all sides, as the messenger drew near, hot and breathless from his exertions.

"We are not to buy any to-day; we are late already, she says, and mustn't stop a minute. She's on a long way ahead; you'll have to run pretty fast to catch her up, I can tell you."

There was a general howl of disappointment at this news, but two or three of the boys set off running at once, fearful of breaking through the rule which obliged every one to be inside the school gates as soon as Miss Royce herself.

"I'm going to have some,—I don't care what she says!" exclaimed Sam, impatiently, swallowing, as he spoke, his last delicious morsel, which left so pleasant a taste behind it that it was impossible to resist the temptation to renew it, when the means were so close at hand, and when it was only a foolish and unkind whim of Miss Royce's that prevented her



"THERE, GIE A BIT TO EACH ON UN."

sanctioning the purchase:—or at least so he reasoned with himself.

"We may not come this way again for ever so long," he continued, rebelliously, "and even if we did, the apples would be all gone by then, most likely. At any rate, I intend to have some. How many a penny, old man?"

"Three a penny, sur," replied the old man, catching the drift of Sam's question, though he didn't appear to hear the words distinctly.

"That's not bad! I shall have some, too, if you do!" cried Smedley.

"So shall I. And I!" cried Freeman and Johnnie Harris, in a breath.

Willie Knowles and Mat had gone on, and Harry and I were preparing to follow, when we heard an exclamation of disappointment from the Scamp, and the next moment he came running after us.

"I say, Bernie, lend me a penny, will you? I haven't got a sou."

"But Miss Royce said we weren't to buy any," I suggested, meekly.

"Oh, humbug! who cares for Miss Royce? Besides, she won't know: we shall have gobbled them up long before we get home. Look here! I'll give you one of my three apples, if you'll only lend it to me."

"I don't like apples," I returned, truthfully, and then, unwilling to be thought stingy, and anxious not to disoblige him, I took out my purse, and lent him the moderate sum he wanted.

The next minute, I was surrounded by a group of some five or six others, all of whom, led on by the Scamp's daring example, were anxious to disobey orders, if they could only succeed in borrowing some of the 'needful' with which to execute their rash design: so, with the best grace I could muster to the occasion, I had soon distributed all the coppers I had.

"My purse feels ever so much lighter, though it isn't really very much poorer!" I said to Harry, as I returned it to my pocket, and then, catching hold of my side of the handle, away we trudged once more, with our heavy basket of berries carefully suspended between us.

"I overheard Rogers and Bob North saying they should go and *prig* some apples," said Harry, confidentially, as soon as we were out of earshot of the others. "I think it's most awfully mean of them, especially after the old chap gave us such a lot. There is a pile lying at the far end of the orchard, beyond where the hedge begins, and there are several big gaps, where they can easily get through, you know."

"Yes, and if fellows can afford to pay, it's worse than mean,—it's *stealing*," I replied, exhibiting more warmth than reasoning power in my remark. "If they were poor boys and were caught," I continued, "they would get sent to prison, most likely, though they would not deserve it half as much as those who ought to know so much better, and haven't nearly the same temptation."

"Do you think I ought to have lent them that money?" I asked, after a brief reflection.

"Oh, they'll pay you all right, you know who they all are, and how many you lent to, don't you?"

"Oh, it isn't *that*! I didn't mean *that*, of course!" I answered, rather indignantly.

"I see. Well, I expect Miss Royce *would* pitch into you, if she knew," replied Harry, thereby expressing, as plainly as the direct words could have done, that he considered my share in the matter somewhat blameable, inasmuch as that it had encouraged others to commit an open breach of the rules, though I myself might have kept strictly within bounds.

Just then, however, we caught up Willie and Mat, and had scarcely been walking with them three minutes, when an old gentleman, who occasionally visited at the school, appeared, walking towards us.

"Well, so you have been blackberrying, I see, young men," he said, stopping us. "And you have been storing them away in other places, besides your baskets; your lips tell tales of that!" and the old gentleman, laughing good-humouredly, pointed with feigned horror at the still besmeared face of the Scamp, who came running up to join our party just at this moment.

"And has the goat been eating berries, too?" he inquired, with a pleased chuckle, stooping down and patting Billy as he spoke.

"No. Billy has been eating the leaves, though," laughed Harry, taking the words out of Mat's mouth.

"Oh, ho! that's it, is it? Then you have pretty well stripped the bushes, between you; cleared them away, branches and all, perhaps, eh?"

"Not exactly, sir!"

"You've left some for me then, eh?"

"Just a few, sir," replied Willie, laughing.

"So your goat eats leaves? Then he is a vegetarian, like me, I suppose?"

"I suppose they all are that, sir."

"I don't know about that; I had one once that was a cannibal."

"A cannibal!" echoed Mat, in a tone of great interest.

"Whatever did he eat, then?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No, sir."

"Why, he used to eat his head off, to be sure!"

"Oh—oh!" I cried, drawing in my breath incredulously. "What an *awful* bung!"

It was out before I knew it, and the next moment I felt ready to bite my tongue out with vexation. The blood rushed hotly to my face, for very shame at the expression which had escaped me, unawares.

But his words had astonished me so much that I had forgotten,

for the moment, that he was not one of my companions, but an old gentleman, and a stranger, and I only a little rude, unbelieving school-boy.

And to add to my discomfiture, Sam went off into a roar of laughter at my unfortunate speech, in which, moreover, he was joined by all the rest, not even excepting Mat, and the old gentleman himself.

"Don't you believe me, then, my boy?" he said, kindly, whilst his eyes twinkled with a mischievous look of merriment.

"No, that I don't," I faltered out, feeling goaded to desperation—although I was almost ready to cry—by the aggravating way in which Sam began laughing again.

But seeing that I was really serious, and that the joke had been carried quite far enough, the old gentleman patted my cheek with a kind, fatherly air, though an amused smile still hovered round his lips, as he said, "Ah! I see you have never heard the expression before, as these clever young fellows here have. No, no, my boy, it's only a figurative way of talking—just as a blind man tells you that he 'sees' a thing, which you are trying to explain to him. It merely means that an animal may eat such a lot of food, that it will be wisest and cheapest, in the end, to part with his head, and so prevent any further consumption of victuals; or, in other words, that it is more expensive to keep him with his head on, than it would be to cut it off! So now, in future, I think you will know what people mean, when they speak of anything 'eating its head off.'"

"I think I shall, sir!" I answered, emphatically.

And, indeed, to this day, I cannot hear the expression, without my thoughts flying back across the long vista of years that have passed since then, to the memorable occasion upon which this idiom was so impressively introduced to my juvenile attention.

"But I think it is great nonsense for people to talk like that," I said to Harry, as our white-haired friend of the

twinkling eyes passed on his way, after cracking a parting joke with the Scamp about the blackberries ;—for I felt rather vexed at having been made such a complete laughing-stock of, and wanted, if possible, to defend myself from the charge of having been so easily "gulled."

"No, it isn't!" said Harry, shortly. "Don't you yourself—and every one else, too, for that matter—do just the same thing, nearly every time you open your lips?"

"No, that I don't!"

"Yes, you do," retorted Harry.

"When? Tell me when? You can't tell me when I have said anything of the sort."

"Oh, yes, I could—scores of times!"

Fortunately for the preservation of the peace, Willie Knowles called back to us, just then, to "come on," for he and Mat were just rounding the corner which brought them in sight of the school gates, and evidently, if Miss Royce had not already passed in, she must be waiting there for stragglers and late arrivals.

"Come, boys!" she cried, impatiently; "how you have all been loitering to-day! I have been waiting here more than five minutes. I shall have to take down all your names, for being late. Willie and Mat, I am ashamed of you; you ought to have known better than to lag behind so."

"Please, Miss Royce," I said, timidly, "old Mr. What-d'you-me-call-um—"

"Oh!" interrupted Mat, shocked at my unintentional irreverence; "it was Mr. Whitehead, Miss Royce; he stopped us for ever so long."

"Did he? Very well; then I suppose I must excuse you five, this time."

"Is that his *real* name?" I asked, incredulously, as we ran up the drive. "How funny that he should be named Whitehead, and have such a white head too!"

"Not so very odd," returned Willie Knowles, laughing.

"There are plenty of people named Whitehead, and hundreds of old gentlemen with white hair; and then, though his name has always been the same, his hair hasn't, you know! I dare say there are scores of Whiteheads that are really brown, and black, and yellow, and red heads!"

"Just as a certain little brat, named Ayres, is very fond of giving himself *airs*," explained Sam, his lips expanding into a broad grin.

"And just as a certain *big* brat, named S. Camp, always thinks himself such a terribly clever *Scamp*!" I retorted, in a mocking tone.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Willie; "he had you there, Sam!"

But I, fearful of the consequences which were likely to follow such a piece of "cheek," set down my side of the basket, with a sudden jerk that nearly sent the blackberries rolling out, and fled away after Mat, who was running round to the paddock to tie up Billy.





CHAPTER XXI.

BAFFLED.

WE had finished our tea, and had returned to the school-room scarcely ten minutes, when the uproar that was going on in all parts of the room was suddenly checked by the sound of the sharp tinkling of the bell upon Mrs. Royce's desk.

All tongues ceased wagging on the instant, and all eyes turned, surprised, in the direction whence came so unexpected a summons for silence.

Miss Royce had entered unobserved amidst the general clamour, and had passed up the room, unheeded by any but those with whom she had come into actual contact.

Yet now as we looked towards her, expectant and perplexed, we could see at a glance that something or other had happened to annoy her in no common degree.

It could not have been the noise and commotion going on all around her, as she made her way to the desk, for freedom of speech and action were always allowed in the school-room during play-hours; and yet her flushed cheeks and tightened lips, and more than all, the angry look in her dark eyes, told us instinctively that a storm was brewing, and would presently break over the heads of some few of us at least. And who so ever ready as the guilty to detect, upon the slightest suspicious sign, the dreaded discovery of their secret?

Therefore, with a sudden flash of certainty, the conviction

darted across my mind, that, in some mysterious manner, Miss Royce had learnt the fact of our having bought the apples, contrary to her express orders; and my heart sank within me as I thought of the share which I had had in the transaction, and which, though not, strictly speaking, a direct act of disobedience, was, nevertheless, an important adjunct to the commission of the deed, by those who had more flagrantly disregarded Miss Royce's commands.

I was right in my surmise, though events soon proved that I had only anticipated half of the actual disclosures.

"There are two boys now in this room," began Miss Royce, in a voice which made every one hold his breath to listen, "who are guilty of the worst fault—no ! *crime* is the proper word for it—which has ever been committed by any of the scholars, past or present, who have studied under this roof,—I mean the crime of theft."

A slight shudder ran through the room, a sort of long-drawn breath, as though from suppressed excitement; followed by an immediate settling down again to perfect stillness, as though in anxious doubt as to what was next to be revealed.

"There is no need for many words," Miss Royce proceeded. "You know yourselves where the guilt lies; but for the benefit of those who are entirely innocent—and I am glad to know that many are—I must briefly explain the matter. In returning from our walk this afternoon, Johnnie Smedley ran after me to know whether you might be allowed to buy some apples from old Mr. Hill. I distinctly told him 'no;' and though this should have been enough, I also added that, being already late, I could not allow you to spend any more time on the road. Did you deliver this message, Johnnie?"

"Yes, Miss Royce," came faintly from the far end of the room.

"Yet in spite of this," continued she, "I find that six or seven of you deliberately disobeyed me, and—what is ten times worse—that two of you were wicked and mean enough to creep through a gap in the hedge, and steal—yes, *steal*, though it *does*

sound plain and ugly!—from a heap of apples lying at the far end of the orchard, where you doubtless thought yourselves screened from observation. And this after the old man had so generously *given* you several apples,—oh, it was mean—mean! as well as wicked. But I trust that whoever the guilty boys are, they will have the honesty and good feeling to stand up bravely, and confess it, without waiting to have the truth wormed out by slow but sure degrees. First of all, then, those of you who bought any apples at all this afternoon, stand up.”

Sam was the first to jump to his feet, and very soon his example was followed by several more. Some one behind poked me ominously in the back, as much as to say, “Why don’t *you* stand up?”

I looked appealingly at Miss Royce.

She had not noticed the movement, so turning my head slightly, I whispered angrily, “I shan’t! I *didn’t* buy any. I don’t like them!”

But in spite of my defiance, I felt rather embarrassed and uncomfortable, having a dimly formed opinion that I *ought* to be amongst those who were standing up, and yet, as my part in the matter was neither suspected nor called in question, I could keep my seat without disobeying orders.

“You can sit down again, for the present,” Miss Royce said, having first taken down the names of the delinquents.

“Now, then, whoever of you took these apples—possibly without thought as to the gravity of the offence which you were committing—will, I trust, stand up without any further urging.”

There was no sound of any one rising; no response broke the utter silence which followed Miss Royce’s words.

Then, following the Scamp’s example, several of the boys stealthily turned their heads, to see whether any one could have risen noiselessly in the back rows.

But no. Not a boy had moved from his seat.

I looked at Rogers and Bob North. They were sitting together, just where they had been standing at the time of

Miss Royce's entrance ; but though to my enlightened eyes the latter was looking down upon the desk with a suspicious dread upon his face, Rogers was turning half round to look behind him, like every body else, with as much unconcern upon his features as any one.

Then I turned, and looked at Harry : were they not going to own it, then ?

Miss Royce waited patiently for a few minutes.

"Come, come, boys ; surely you will never bear such an imputation upon the character of the school, and not speak out candidly ? I have been inexpressibly grieved and pained to find my confidence in so many of you misplaced, but that there should be amongst you boys too cowardly and mean to own their fault, is, perhaps, the saddest thought of all. If any of you know anything of this matter, speak out. It has already gone too far for you to hold back anything you may know, from a mere desire to screen your companions ; for, hard though it may be for you to inform against one another, it will surely be kinder than allowing the culprits to suffer the penalty of being publicly convicted of their crime, by the very person from whom they have stolen."

Again I looked mutely at Harry : should we tell ?

"No, no," he whispered, under his breath. "I don't *know* that *they* did it."

And again the school waited in dead silence.

"Very well !" exclaimed Miss Royce at length, in a tone of desperation. Then I suppose Mr. and Mrs. Hill must come in : would you kindly fetch them, Miss Baxter ?"

An interval of anxious suspense, and then the door opened, and in tottered our old friend of the orchard, and his wife. Mrs. Royce, too, having returned from the village, accompanied them into the room, the expression on her face warning us that she knew all.

At any other time we should have laughed at the odd spectacle which the old man and his dame presented, each

bent low with age and care, and both dressed in a style so primitive and old-fashioned, that they looked as though they might have stepped down from their place on the walls, out of some ancient picture of by-gone days.

Now, however, our countenances were as grave and serious as those of the old couple themselves, whose look of trouble and concern seemed more in keeping with the proper aspect of the accused than the accuser.

"Well, I declar' noo, I can't 'xactly say which on 'em it wur," the old dame said, with a look of the utmost perplexity, as she peered anxiously into the faces, one after another, of the long row of boys standing in line to be scrutinized, in obedience to Mrs. Royce's peremptory commands.

But in vain she scanned each face, up and down, and up again, only appearing to become more hopelessly bewildered at each fresh turn.

"Boys be like praties," she said, with a desponding sigh at the fruitlessness of her task ; "they be all so much alike, 'cept that som's little and som's big, that thur ain't no telling t'other from which."

"Tickler when theys gotten their jackuts on!—eh, wife?" interrupted her partner, rubbing his hands together with a grim air of satisfaction at his readiness in carrying on her simile. "And thee must remembur as 'tain't the ones as 'as the fairest look as is allus the easiest to peel. Maybe, for all thur smooth skins, theys gotten such a lot of 'eyes' as 'll make 'em too sharp to be a match for thee, old 'oman."

"'Old thy tongue, Tummas, do!" retorted the old lady, sharply, resenting her lord's intrusion into the conversation. Then, turning again to Mrs. Royce, she proceeded, "You see, mum, I wur up at my top windy when I wur watchin' 'em, and it wur a smart bit off for my poor eyes to see plain, though I did think as I should ha' known 'em anywheres. But noo, when they be all togethur, they seems just as like as beans, and thur baint no tellin' 'em at all, at all!" and the old

woman shook her head at her husband, with an air of complete distress.

"No, no, Suky," he said, gravely, "it 'ud never do for thee to go an' put thy 'and on the wrong uns; that 'ud be worse than on none at all, wife." Then turning to Mrs. Royce, he added, "It goes agin the grain for us to come 'ere and complayun at all, mum; but then, my missus an' I, we never could see the justice o' letting one boy off 'cause 'e's gotten a better coat to his back nor t'other; an' so it's a matter o' conshuns, like, with us, mum."

But it was all of no use, and at last, with many a grunt, and many an exclamation of regret and sorrow, the old couple went their way, Mrs. Royce assuring them very earnestly that no effort should be spared to discover the culprits.

As soon as they were gone, Mrs. Royce returned, and questioned each boy in succession.

One after the other came the prompt replies, in the negative without a single exception; Rogers' and Bob North's "no" being pronounced so firmly and loudly as to reassure me in the belief that Harry was probably mistaken in his surmise.

"As none of you choose to own your guilt, you must all suffer for the sake of the two whom we know to be amongst your number, but whom we are unable, just at present, to identify," said Mrs. Royce at last, her temper and her patience both well-nigh exhausted.

So it came to pass that the whole school was sentenced to be henceforth in a state of punishment and disgrace, until the guilty parties should choose to confess, or until some one should throw a ray of light upon the mystery sufficiently bright to clear it up. Those who had bought apples, contrary to orders, were dismissed to various places of solitary confinement, with certain unpleasant tasks to perform, whilst the rest of us were appointed to struggle with a fair amount of laborious work in the school-room, with Miss Baxter keeping guard over us to report all those who spoke, or otherwise misconducted themselves.

"Bernard Ayres has been talking very much, in spite of my frequently reproving him," I heard her say, just as I was whispering, for the third or fourth time, to Harry Morland.

I looked up. Miss Royce had returned, and this complaint was being addressed to her.

It was only too true. If there were one fault above another which was always getting me into trouble, it was this immoderate use of my tongue; and certainly I had given way to it this evening, with a freedom which nothing could excuse.

Without a word, Miss Royce beckoned to me to follow her. I rose slowly, pulled out my legs from the form with aggravating deliberateness, flung my book into the desk, and banging down the lid noisily, stalked out of the room, with a parting glance of sulky defiance at Miss Baxter, in as angry a frame of mind as possible.

I felt rather ashamed of myself, and a good deal uncomfortable, though, as soon as the door closed behind us, leaving me alone with Miss Royce.

However, she said nothing, but led the way upstairs to a little dressing-room, which had lately been fitted up as a bedroom, but was not at present occupied by any one.

Here she paused, and placing one hand firmly upon my shoulder, said briefly,—

"You must stay here, Bernard, until I come to you again. I shall say nothing further to you, until you are in a better frame of mind to listen."

I shook myself impatiently free from her grasp, and marched into the room with as much nonchalance as I could assume. At that moment my whole heart felt hard and defiant, and I *hated* her!

I walked straight up to the window, and as soon as I heard the click of the closing door, leaned my forehead languidly against the cold glass, but though my eyes were fixed steadily upon the landscape without, my senses took in nothing of its beauty, nor of its outward signs of life.

I don't know how long I stood there without moving. I only knew, in a dull, unreasoning kind of way, that I was devoured with a haunting, restless sense of anger.

Angry with everything and everybody; and yet, if I had tried to define a cause, I do not think I could have given a sufficient reason.

I had brought it all upon myself; and yet I hated Miss Baxter and Miss Royce, as bitterly, at this moment, as I did Rogers and Bob North, who had both tittered audibly at my disgrace—the former, doubtless, from sheer malice, but the latter, as certainly, from no deeper motives than those which usually prompted him upon every occasion of a similar nature, to follow in the wake of his bosom-friend and companion.

The evening wore on slowly, and one by one the lights down in the town began to twinkle out, until at length there seemed to be hundreds of bright, star-like spots dotted all about in the valley and upon the hill-sides, growing more and more brilliant by very contrast, as the darkness gradually became denser. How cold and stiff my limbs felt when at length I altered my position!

I must have been standing there a long, long while, to be so cramped and chilly, when the nights were still comparatively warm.

Was it ten or eleven o'clock yet? Perhaps they had all gone to bed, and forgotten me! At any rate I would look out to reassure myself. So, creeping softly to the door, I peeped out. No! The light was burning down in the hall, so they were still up.

What was that tramping sound? Could it possibly be the boys going into the dining-room for evening prayers?

Then, if so, it could not be so very late, after all—not more than half-past eight at the outside.

Would they call me? I wondered.

But no summons came, and presently I heard the servants

shutting the door behind them, as they followed in the wake of the boys. Then I retreated into my prison again.

How dark and cold and wretched it seemed, all by myself up here !

I always hated solitary confinement, and now, in the gathering gloom, the stillness and loneliness of the place made me shiver involuntarily, as I turned once more to the window.

A sudden thought flashed like a meteor through my brain.

Far away, down yonder, glittered the lights of the railway-station, and even as I looked, I could faintly discern a great white cloud of smoke rising from its midst.

A train was waiting :—I would run away !

Why should I stay here to be treated in this miserable fashion, where everything was so unpleasant and disagreeable, and where I felt so wretchedly unhappy ?

And then came before my mind's eye, a passing vision of the dear old home I had left behind, with its cosy, cheerful rooms aglow with light and warmth, and dearer than all, that dear, kind, loving, old father of mine, against whom I had never yet felt even the shadow of a passing resentment.

How different it seemed to this horrid place ! and with an additional force lent to the contrast by my all-absorbing sense of bitterness and wrath, I stole once more to the door, and moving stealthily to the head of the stairs, listened intently to catch the faintest sound.

This temptation to run away had come so strongly and suddenly into my head, that I never waited to turn over any mental pros and cons as to the success of my scheme, but acted upon the spur of the moment, with all the energy and decision of a deliberately-formed plan.

Down below, they were only just beginning to sing, and after the hymn would come the customary chapter ; so there would be plenty of time to make an escape, and no fear of any interruption.



CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER APPARITION.

SLIPPING off my boots, I sped noiselessly down the stairs, ran hastily to the peg in the hall where hung my coat and hat, and then paused a moment to consider.

The back-kitchen door would be the best to go out by. There would be less chance of being heard there than in the front, for both doors were sure to be bolted at this time of night, and though it would be farther to run afterwards, when once out in the open air, yet the fact of its having been unfastened would not be noticed, in this case, so quickly as it would be in the other.

Out at last ! and not a sound could have reached the dining-room, for fortunately the key turned easily in the lock, and I had not stopped to do more than pull the door close to after me, when once I had crossed the threshold.

So on went my boots again, and round the house sped I, as hard as my legs would carry me.

How much darker it seemed out of doors than it did when looking out upon the night from my bedroom window !

Well, perhaps it was only the shade of the house, and the trees and shrubs growing thickly all around, which kept out the light so much.

It would be better when once I was out upon the road, and yet—the lane was flanked on either side by tall banks and

higher hedges, for at least half a mile after you passed the Lanky Man's house, and not a single habitation the whole distance, either!

Ah! and the Lanky Man!

That was a new thought, and suggested a fresh train of reflections, which had not previously entered my head, and which was anything but calculated to encourage those feelings of fortitude and bravery, which were so necessary to the accomplishment of my purpose.

Certainly the *real* "Springall Jack" was safely enough out of the way, but then who could tell what one might meet along that stretch of land lying between his cottage and the first outlying houses of the village?

Already my pace slackened, and a sickening foreboding of possible ills began to take the place of my hastily-formed desire for flight.

But the step was taken, and I must go on now. Even if I wished to retrace my steps, I should scarcely have time to steal safely back upstairs, without encountering some one or other returning from the dining-room.

Aha! What's that?

I am getting near the entrance gates now, and surely that creaking noise I hear sounds as though they are being slowly opened.

My faculties are strained to the utmost; with one's nerves in such a state of tension, one can fancy almost any sight or sound.

Courage! If I am to go on, I may as well wait until I meet actual troubles, without becoming so agitated and alarmed over imaginary ones.

There it is again, though! Louder and more distinct, and this time I can plainly detect the sound of the latch being lifted.

I am within two or three yards of the gates by now, and come to a dead stand-still as I strain my eyes till they ache, to try and discover whether there be anything there.

Yes! Between the bars of the gates, and towering high above the top rail, I can dimly discern the outline of a tall, upright figure, spreading out at top in the most eccentric and unaccountable manner, into the form of a clumsy, badly-shaped fan.

"Oh! not another 'Springall Jack!' Not another 'Springall Jack'!" I repeat, in a horrified whisper to myself, as I see the figure move, and hear the gate swing upon its hinges.

Well, I can't face *that*! And without another thought of my proposed flight, or of the inevitable discovery of my project, if I return, I wheel sharp round, and whisk back to the house like lightning.

Without a thought of the surprise which will greet me, when I am discovered to be out of doors, with no other idea but one of escape to safety and shelter, I beat with all my might upon the front door, crying out, amidst a paroxysm of passionate sobs,—

"Oh, let me in, quick!—boo-hoo, boo-hoo—it's me, it's me (no thought of grammar!)—boo-oo-oo! Oh! do come! do! doo-ooo!"

In my passion of fear and dread, I rang and rapped, beat with my fists, and kicked hard with my boots, keeping up all the time a wail of woful prayer to be let in, that very soon brought an excited crowd to the other side of the door.

There was a short pause—an age it seemed to me—after the first rush, a few hurried exclamations of intense surprise bandied from one to the other, and then the door was quickly thrown open.

In I rushed, into the blinding light, and throwing myself headlong into Miss Royce's arms, burst into a louder fit of hysterical sobbing than before.

It was useless to attempt to arrive at any explanation of the mystery through me, just for a bit, for my whole frame was shaking with the violence of my stormy sobs; but to make matters worse, for those who were still doubtful as to what

could possibly have happened to reduce me to such a condition of fright and agitation, or to account for my singular and unexpected appearance at the front door, when popularly believed to be upstairs, Anne came rushing from the kitchen, ominously armed with the poker in one hand, whilst she brandished the tongs in the other.

"The back-kitchen door's open, Mum, there's some one broke in for certain, Mum!" she cried, excitedly.

The boys now were all gathered round, in a state of the wildest excitement, and there is no telling to what pitch the alarm might not have arisen, had not a further exclamation from the same quarter produced an instantaneous feeling of relief in every mind.

"Thank Heaven!" cried Anne, fervently, "here's Mr. Robbins come just in the very nick of time."

I turned my head to take one hasty glance, burying it again the next instant in its hiding-place upon Miss Royce's shoulder; yet that one look was enough to explain the reason of my fright, as well as to satisfy my fears, although I was still too agitated to be calmed thereby.

For there stood Mr. Robbins, the washerwoman's husband, with the huge basket of clean clothes upon his head, and upon his face a most ludicrous expression of intense, though stolid, surprise and wonder.

Whilst the wildest and most improbable explanations of my conduct were being volubly suggested down below, Miss Royce carried me off to bed, and doing her utmost all the time to soothe my agitated spirits, contrived to win from me, between my choking sobs, all the story of my attempted flight.

"I can't go to sleep till I've told you one thing," I said, in a husky, watery kind of voice. "I ought to have told you before, and if I had, none of this would have happened, but I don't care now, if they *do* knock me to pieces for telling:—I know who stole the apples,—it was Rogers and Bob North."

Where was my hatred of Miss Royce, now? Gone, long

ago, and in its place a fierce hatred of self, for all the trouble I had brought upon other people as well as upon myself, and a righteous desire to make such atonement as lay in my power, even at the risk of being branded for ever after as a "sneak."

Oh, if I had only had courage and sense enough to speak out at first, what a lot of misery to myself and others would have been prevented! Yet a large majority of the boys would have blamed me for taking such a course, even though the confession would have resulted in saving them from the irksome punishment which they had been obliged to undergo.

Miss Royce gave me a long lecture, principally about the false ideas that schoolboys so often hold upon the subject of "sneaking," as they term it: an opinion which they always stick to with such tenacity, she said, that any virtue such a sentiment may intrinsically possess is more than counteracted by the absurd length to which they carry their views.

Then she warned me gently of the evil consequences of allowing myself to be so easily overcome by my nervous dread and fear of anything a trifle startling or unusual; telling me, with a degree of fervour that I thought quite uncalled for, of the lifelong injury I should do myself mentally, if I gave way so easily to such foolish terror and alarm, or allowed my imagination to run away with my understanding, when overtaken by anything apparently mysterious and inexplicable, or encountered by any situation which might really owe half its terrors to the surrounding influences of darkness and night.

But the words which left the deepest sting behind them were those which she uttered, just as the sound of the boys' footsteps, beginning to ascend the stairs on their way to bed, reached us faintly through the long corridor which intervened.

"And *you* are the little boy who was so anxious to be a peacemaker, are you not?" she said, gravely. "You haven't felt much like one this evening, have you?"

I made no reply, until, finding that she paused, as though ex-

pecting an answer, I managed to falter out a low "No—o—o;" though the effort occasioned a fresh gasp for breath, and an involuntary quivering of the lips, that foreboded another return of the shaking sobs from which I had only just partially recovered.

"A little peacemaker, you know, must have peace in his own heart first; it would never do to go about trying to make others kind and friendly, if all the while one's own mind was full of hard and angry thoughts."

The appearance of Willie Knowles at the head of the long file of boys coming to their quarters in this dormitory, put a sudden stop to any further remarks; so as soon as Miss Royce rose from my bedside, I turned over on my pillow with my face to the wall, so that the light shining upon my tell-tale face should not exhibit to all the boys the traces of my recent tears, still visible in swollen eyes and shining nose and cheeks.

Everybody scrambled into bed in just no time to-night, for almost all were still lingering under the sense of disgrace at this evening's punishment, and in less than five minutes Miss Royce had departed, leaving us in complete silence as well as total darkness.

As for me, I lay wide awake, feeling very much like a whipped dog, who, knowing he has richly deserved his chastisement, slinks off to the shelter of his kennel, his tail between his legs, and lies there spiritless and wretched, but with no thought or look of resentment against the hand which has been inflicting the just penalty of his own transgression.

Perhaps Miss Royce had never guessed how deeply the words of my chosen text had rooted themselves in my imagination, nor how constantly the hope of a literal fulfilment of their meaning had been uppermost in my thoughts, ever since my vivid dream upon the lawn.

Certain it is that her words had wounded me to the quick, filling my heart with a feeling of despondency deeper than I had hitherto experienced with regard to my hopes and fears on

this subject; and heaven knows that it was only too often ready to be cast down and discouraged, without any further provocation from such a source as this.

But my spirits were destined to sink, if possible, even one degree lower, for, when all the room seemed sunk in stillness and slumber, I became suddenly conscious of some one's presence in my immediate vicinity, and in another moment a couple of rough hands were laid heavily upon me, whilst to my ears came the unwelcome sound of Rogers' voice, whispering softly,—

"Have you been sneaking of us, have you?" and he shook me angrily, uncertain whether I were asleep or not.

I tried to roll myself away from under his hands, but his hold upon me only tightened the more, as with fiercer impatience he repeated his question.

"D'you hear, youngster; have you been sneaking of us? Have you, I say?"

What reply *could* I make? I *dare* not say I had, and I *wouldn't* tell a lie.

"What do you mean?" I answered, evasively, in a voice querulous with suppressed agitation.

"You know!" he returned, shortly, but in a tone which clearly marked his rising anger. "Have you, or have you not sneaked to Miss Royce?"

Still no reply.

Then, jumping at once to the right conclusion, he broke forth into a perfect torrent of verbal abuse.

"You *have*! you little sneak! you vile, snivelling, wretched, little tell-tale! *You* set up for a saint, indeed! *you* the favourite of all the school! faugh! it makes me sick. Take that for your impudence, you mean little traitor! and that! and that! I'll teach you how to go telling lies about me. You'll never get *me* into a row, without being sorry for it yourself, I can tell you."

And with a volley of imprecations such as these, he proceeded to give me such a drubbing as would soon have turned

my skin black and blue with bruises, had it not been for the friendly protection of the bed-clothes.

And other help, too, was nearer than I had anticipated, for presently Rogers' growling threats of vengeance turned into a howl of surprised indignation and anger, as his attack upon me was suddenly interrupted by an unexpected assault upon his rear quarters, that made him wheel round double quick to face his new enemy.

"Oh, it's *you*, is it?" he said, boiling over with rage and vexation, as he rubbed the place where Willie Knowles' knee had left a marked impression. "You great bully! you are always preventing that little beast from getting his proper deserts. I've a jolly good mind to pitch into *you*; but, by Jove, I *will* let that young'un have it hot, some fine day, when you're not by to stop the sport,—so your cursed interference won't benefit him much in the end."

"You just get off to bed, and don't use bad language!" said Willie Knowles, loftily, not appearing to notice his angry threats, and taking Rogers by the shoulders, he set him off at a trot towards his bedside, giving him, when half way across the room, a parting "duck's egg," that lent an additional impetus to the rest of the journey.

Rogers, with all his brag, knew his opponent too well to resist; so back he slunk into bed, muttering all sorts of savage remarks as to his schemes for revenge, both upon myself and my gallant champion.

But it was a long while ere he was able to put any such plans into operation, for the next day the whole school was summoned together to hear a "regular downright thundering big 'jaw,'" as Harry Morland expressed it to me in a whispered 'aside,' as we sat solemnly awaiting Mrs. Royce's entrance.

I am not going to inflict upon you any very long account of her sermon, further than to mention how she pointed out to us the folly that it was—merely from our own point of view—for any of us to have held back anything we knew, or sus-

pected, about the facts of the stolen apples, from a false notion of honour, or dishonour, about "telling."

"An idea which is not only wrong, when carried to such silly extremes as in the present case," she proceeded, "but which must always result in placing the whole school in a worse light than it deserves, besides occasioning, as it has done now, the further disgrace and unpleasantness of an universal punishment. And how easily some of you might have saved your comrades from such inevitable injustice by simply and bravely speaking out the truth instead of holding your peace, because you feared being twitted and taunted as 'sneaks.'"

"Why, under any other circumstances, your own common sense would tell you plainly enough that it is much more reasonable, as well as honourable, to lay the blame and the punishment upon those whose guilt deserves it, than to passively sit looking on, allowing a vast number of perfectly innocent victims to suffer, through no fault of their own, when a word from you would explain all, and set them free again.

"I tell you plainly and publicly, boys, that had it not been for the fact that Rogers' parents are just now travelling on the continent, I should have made such an example of him and Robert North, as would have left no doubt upon your minds as to the gravity with which I view their offence. But such being the case, I cannot, of course, justly expel one unless the other go also, and therefore, although I shall allow them to remain amongst you during the rest of the half-year, I shall take the earliest opportunity of requesting their respective parents to remove them to some other school, before the commencement of another term."

What a sensation this announcement created! The boys seemed scarcely able to sit still upon their seats, whilst so many gave vent to their suppressed excitement in short, jerky whispers to their next-door neighbours, that it really caused quite a buzz of semi-audible conversation all over the room.

But the sudden murmurs died away into total silence, as Mrs. Royce's voice was raised once more.

"For the present, I have decided that the two guilty boys must accompany me to the scene of their disgraceful crime, and there make the fullest apology to the old man and his wife, each one presenting them, at the same time, with the sum of five shillings, from their private pocket-money, as a recognition of the kindness and forbearance of the old couple in not pressing the case further."

Another thrill ran through the many forms of boys, from back to front, and end to end. With many of them—little ones especially—to forfeit such a sum as that would mean bankruptcy and ruin, in the middle of the half, as this was; and even with the most affluent, though it would not reduce them to absolute beggary, yet it would sadly curtail their expenditure just towards holiday time, when every one wanted coin so badly, and so little was forthcoming, owing to past recklessness and improvidence.

"One more remark, and I have done," continued Mrs. Royce. "You will, of course, hold no intercourse with these two boys, for at least a week to come. They will be kept apart from you during the daytime, and at night whoever is detected speaking to, or in any way communicating with them, will be liable to a severe punishment; so take care, all of you, how you behave. You can now resume your games and pursuits, until the bell rings for school."

So saying, Mrs. Royce descended from the desk, and sailed majestically down the room, the two culprits following slowly and dejectedly in her wake.





CHAPTER XXIII.

A SWEET SURPRISE.

ABOUT three weeks after this occurrence, I was squatting down upon the floor, in the recess of the hall window, diligently engaged in the laborious work of lacing my boots, when my attention was diverted, and my curiosity aroused, by the approaching sound of an animated conversation, which was being briskly carried on by a small group of boys passing through on their way to the schoolroom.

"Look out ! here's Bernard Ayres !" cried one, in a warning voice.

"Shall we tell him ?" asked another.

"No, no," replied a third, in a voice that I knew only too well ; "he'll *sneak* ;" and the bitter emphasis with which the last cutting word was uttered could have come from no one else but my enemy Rogers.

"Oh, he's all right," cried the Scamp, indignantly ; "besides, he never touches it, so we needn't trouble to stop and tell him. Come along, I want to find Will Knowles."

"He has just gone into the schoolroom," shouted Harry Morland, who was seated close beside me on the floor, and, without further parley with us, the boys moved onward to find him.

"What—what's it all about ? What do they mean ?" I asked Harry, inquisitively, trying at the same time to speak with as

much unconcern as though I had never noticed Rogers' sneer ; for, from Harry's unwonted absence of curiosity on the subject, I concluded, naturally, that he was in the secret—if secret it were.

But just at that moment, my eyes, wandering out of the window, caught sight of a figure down yonder at the gates, whose form, somehow or other, seemed so familiar, that my attention was immediately riveted upon this new object, to the total exclusion, for the time being, of every other interesting topic under the sun.

"There's some gentleman coming here, Harry ; he's trying to undo the gate. There ! he has unlatched it now ; he must be a stranger, or else he would know how to open it at once, wouldn't he ? but it always does bother people who aren't used to it."

"Jolly for the tramps, ain't it ?" interrupted Harry. "I've seen ever so many give it up in despair, looking so angry when they've had to pass on, baffled and disappointed."

"I wonder who it is," I went on, not heeding Harry's remarks, but flattening my nose against the window pane to get a clearer view, totally indifferent to the fact that the windows had been cleaned only this morning, and that upon the brightly-polished glass my little snub would leave a blurred, dull blotch to mark its greasy presence. "And yet it looks like some one I know, too ; perhaps it is some one's father come to see them. Whose can it be, I wonder ? Oh lawks ! Harry,—it's *my* father !"

My voice had gradually risen to quite a high pitch of excitement, until the last exclamation of intense surprise burst forth with such energy and power as to fairly astonish Harry Morland.

But, with a joyous shout, I had sprung past him, ere he could find a vent for his amazement, and the next instant I had leapt into my father's arms, too much overcome with delighted surprise to think any further of any such petty

sorrows as Rogers' contemptuous sneer, or the irritation which I had felt at hearing a passing conversation abruptly broken off, as soon as my presence had been discerned.

"Well, and how is the little man?" said the deep, gruff voice that I knew so well and loved so tenderly, when at last my nearly-strangling embrace relaxed sufficiently to allow its half-suffocated victim time to breathe and speak.

"Why didn't you write and say that you were coming?" I asked, rather reproachfully, following up my own train of thought without heeding his question. "Then I should have been expecting you and should have had something to look forward to."

"And supposing I didn't know, myself, until this morning, that I should be able to get away,—how then, little man?" (How familiar the quaint, playful title sounded in my ears!) "Besides, don't you like 'a sweet surprise,' as well in real life as in play? And what makes the little man talk about 'wanting something to look forward to,'—just as though every day weren't as happy as it is long!"

"Tisn't though!" I answered, grimly. And then, presently, I added, "It seemed *such* an age since I had seen you, only a minute ago, and now I feel just as though I hadn't ever left you; isn't it funny?" And placing a hand against each of his cheeks, I pushed out his lips for another kiss, laughing gleefully, meanwhile, to see what a comical expression the screwed-up mouth gave to his whole face.

In the afternoon, we went a walk together—he and I.

For he had begged a half-holiday for the whole school. It was the fashion, and a highly popular one too, for all worthy folks, who came to see their relatives, to crave the favour of a general half-holiday, at the risk of being sorely tried and worried, during their brief stay, should they refuse to make such martyrs of themselves for the sake of the public weal. So now the boys had gone off to the common, at the top of the neighbouring hill, to have a fine, rollicking game of football.

We accompanied them to the ground, and then, after taking

leave of Miss Royce, my father caught me by the hand, telling me that he would take me a long, round-about way to the station, for the sake of the ramble together. Away we went—one of us, at least, in the wildest spirits—in a direction wholly unknown to me.

You may be sure I talked fast enough! I related to him all the varied interests and incidents in my school life; regaled him with a graphic description of our adventure with "Springall Jack;" pictured the scene at his trial,—though doubtless he knew it all already;—told him of my unspeakable dread of having to appear as a witness again at the forthcoming assizes, before such a terrible and awe-inspiring personage as a grave, solemn judge, in his red robes and curly, flowing wig, and the ordeal that it would be to face those hard, remorseless barristers, who frightened you into saying what you didn't mean, and prevented you from saying what you did; and whose great, black-robed bodies and towy wigs had reminded me, the only time I had seen them, of the black-plumaged fowls, with short legs and white top-knots, that strutted about so dignifiedly in the poultry-yard at home.

And then I gave him an account of our visits to Mrs. Hughes; told him of the different games we played at school; how much I liked several of the boys—and little Mary too!—and how I hated Rogers, in spite of everything; and how difficult it was to be the little peacemaker that I did so long to become.

"For Miss Royce says that a little peacemaker must have peace in his own heart first," I said, repeating her words with an accuracy that proved how deeply they had sunk into my heart; "and that we musn't fancy that a peacemaker has only to go about and stop fights, but that a boy may be one who has never even seen a fight, whilst another, who interferes in every quarrel that he can, may never be a peacemaker after all! If our hearts are full of hard and unkind thoughts we can never be true peacemakers at all, she says,—do you think so too, Father?"

"Ay, ay, child! I daresay she's right, I daresay she's right," answered my father, but his voice sounded absent, as though his thoughts were somewhere else.

"But a peacemaker is a child of God—or shall be—the text says; does it mean that if you aren't one, you can't be a child of God; does it, Father?" I went on, perseveringly:—"because if so, and it is so difficult to be one, God's family won't be a very big one, will it, Father?"

"Hush, hush! Bernie," said he, gravely, "we must not talk lightly of these things;" but though his words sounded rather like a reproof, I don't think he really thought my words were anything more than what they actually were—the simple, earnest expression of my childish fancy.

"Mrs. Hughes says she knows you *quite* well," I said presently, thinking that, perhaps, after his last speech, I had better change the topic. "So, of course, *you* know *her*, don't you, Father?"

"I used to once, Bernard; I used to once," he repeated, in the same grave, dreamy tone as before. And then, after asking two or three questions about her, which I was only too proud and happy to answer, he turned the subject, and talked of other things.

"The time is getting on," he said, presently, taking out his watch; that watch whose cover had so often baffled my infantine curiosity, by so mysteriously flying open when I blew upon it, with red, full-blown, puffing cheeks; but which, nevertheless—more mysteriously still—always refused to open in obedience to *my* commands, when the order of things was reversed, and I held the watch whilst father blew—in vain.

"The turning down to the valley used to be hereabouts, I thought," said he, perplexed at his apparent forgetfulness of the local geography. "Ah! there it is! Now then, little man, we must have a run down this hill, or I shall be too late!"

Off we set, full trot down the steep slope, until I was too

much out of breath to run any farther, and was obliged to pull up short, with a sudden cry that I had got "the stitch," and couldn't run another step.

"Why, I know just where we are now," I cried, presently, as I recognised certain familiar features in the surroundings of the landscape. "Why, this is Mrs. Hughes' house just here—and you knew it all the time, I do believe," I cried, suspiciously, fixing a most searching glance upon my father's face as I spoke, in the desire to detect whether or no he had been trying to hoax me hitherto.

But no! His voice and manner, when he next spoke, convinced me that he was not joking.

"This is? Where? No, I didn't, indeed," he protested, with a sound of startled surprise in his voice.

"And there *is* Mrs. Hughes—and little Mary, too." (She was bigger than I was, it is true,—taller that is, if not older,—but little boys are apt to adopt a patronizing tone, particularly towards little girls for whom they have a secret weakness!) "See! they are just coming down to the gate."

"Are they?" cried my father, hurriedly. "Come, come, Bernie, how you do lag behind!"

"Won't you stop and speak to them? *Do* stop,—just a minute! See, see! Mrs. Hughes, here is my father!" and I nodded vigorously from one to the other; for she and Mary were out at their gate by the time we passed, and were both nodding and smiling at me across the wide bend in the roadway.

Mrs. Hughes started, and looked grave all of a sudden, when I mentioned who my companion was, for apparently she had not noticed him much at first, or else it must have been so long since the time when she used to know him so well, that he had altered too much in the interim to be easily recognised at first glance.

But meanwhile, my father's hand had tightened its grasp upon mine, with an almost angry pressure; and before the

words had died away from my lips, he had pulled me past the level of their gateway, urging me forward with an impatience and in a tone so unusual to him, that I looked up at him as he strode along, and then back at the motionless figure of Mrs. Hughes leaning against the gate, with an expression on my face of the most intense and unfeigned astonishment.

"Why—if you know each other so well—why ever don't you speak?" I broke out, slowly, in a tone of wondering curiosity.

"Little boys should never ask 'why?'" was the prompt reply I received; and so sternly were the words uttered that I saw plainly I was not expected to make any further remarks on the subject.

Still, with a head brimful of so interesting and personal a topic, how was I to stifle my feelings of surprise and inquisitiveness at a first bidding?

So, after a good deal of pondering as to the reasons—possible or impossible—of such odd conduct on the part of these two old friends, who had not seen each other for so long, and after turning over in my mind the best and surest means of arriving at an explanation of the mystery, I began again.

"Father?"

"Well?"

"Have you and Mrs. Hughes ever had a quarrel?"

"What did I tell you just now, child?" said my father, impatiently. "Did not I say that little boys shouldn't ask questions?"

"But, Father, if you have," I persisted, jumping at once to the conclusion that since he did not deny it, my surmise must certainly be correct,—“if you have; you will never be a child of God, unless you make it up.”

"Nonsense, Bernard! Whatever put such foolish notions into your head, child? I can't imagine where you can have picked up such silly, childish ideas; and besides, you must not learn to speak to me like that,—it's not respectful."

He was really irritated and angry this time,—there was no mistake about that. And so, merely muttering something about supposing that it was only because I *was* a child, that I spoke “childishly,” but that, nevertheless, I was very sorry for speaking out my thoughts, I relapsed into a gloomy silence, during which some slight effort was required to gain the mastery over the ready tears which had so narrowly missed overflowing their banks.

At last the station was reached, and, disconsolate and sad, I stood upon the platform, waiting to see the last of the loved one, whose fleeting visit had thrown such a gleam of sunshine across this day’s pathway.

“See, we should not have had too much time if we *had* stopped to speak to Mrs. Hughes,” said my father, leaning out of window, and watching the guard preparing to blow his whistle. His voice had assumed a tone of affected unconcern, as though anxious to dispel any remaining doubts which might still be rankling in my breast.

“Not unless we had given up going to Davis’!” I returned, looking down suggestively at the packets on my arm, consisting of booty borne away after a brief visit to the principal confectioner’s.

Well, that little speech showed that Father’s thoughts had returned to the subject, as though our short conversation had sunk more deeply into his heart than he would care to own.

But there was no time to say more, for the next minute the train glided silently out of the station, leaving a very little boy all alone on the platform, to look wistfully after it with glistening eyes, as long as he could keep in view a certain well-loved head that nodded gaily to him through an open window.

Out of sight, at last! Well, if after the longest night must come the dawn, it is equally true that after the longest day must come the dusk; and it is only to be expected that the dear old head will fade out of sight, as soon as the train whisks round yonder corner. Still, I sighed mournfully as I turned

slowly away, thinking gloomily of the long, long time that must elapse before my eyes would be gladdened, and my heart warmed by the recurrence of such a pleasure again.

Just as I entered, on my homeward journey, upon the long stretch of blank road lying between the village and the school, the rain began all at once to patter down so fast, that I was forced, after stowing away as many packages as I could cram into my pockets, to set off running at the top of my speed, to try and escape as much as possible of what threatened to become a regular deluge.

Mrs. Royce came bustling out to the front door, for, through the drawing-room window, she was anxiously watching for our arrival.

"Dear! dear!" she cried, "you are all wet through and through, I'm afraid. The others are close behind, I suppose."

"Indeed, I don't know, Mrs. Royce; I did not see anything of them."

"Oh, I forgot. You have been out with your father, have you not?" and then, moving anxiously to the open door, she looked out at the fast driving rain, exclaiming, with a rueful face,—

"I do trust that they have had the sense to shelter somewhere; they will all be soaked to the skin if they have not."

Then she came hastily back to me, and felt my coat and knickerbockers.

"Good gracious, child! you are *sopping*! Get your boots off at once, and run upstairs, and change every single thing you have on, this very minute."

I was still tugging vigorously away at an obstinate knot which would not come undone, when Mrs. Royce—still on the watch—called out, "Oh, here is Sam at the gate, so the rest will soon be here now. I must run and tell Anne to see about drying their wet clothes."

"Oh my!" exclaimed the Scamp, running in; and throwing himself heavily down upon the floor beside me, he sat there,

"puffing and blowing like a young grampus," as he himself put it.

"If it hadn't been for the rain," he panted, "I declare I should have been on fire by this time, I'm so hot; but this drizzle quite puts me out—as it does the old lady, I can see!" and Sam winked knowingly at Mrs. Royce's back, as she marched once more from the kitchen to the front door, with every sign of worry and bustle upon her face. And then he began to chuckle immoderately at his feeble attempt at punning, until he checked himself to upbraid me for being such a noodle as not to "twig" the joke at once.

He broke off, however, as soon as Will Knowles made his appearance, and commenced, instead, a lively series of grimaces, for the special benefit of that young gentleman, who stood detained by Mrs. Royce, to answer her impatient inquiries respecting those behind, and who found it hard work to preserve a respectful gravity, in the face of such ludicrous insults as were being heaped upon him by the irrepressible Scamp.

"At any rate I beat you, old boy!" cried the Scamp, exultingly, referring to the race they had had, as Willie—released at last—came laughing up to us to compare notes upon our relative degrees of dampness;—"and I ain't half such a daddy-long-legs as you, either."

"You haven't so much to carry in your head as I have," replied Willie, chaffingly; "brains weigh heavy, you know, so, of course, those that have not any, can get over the ground the lightest and quickest."

Further discussion upon a point so delicate and personal was interrupted by the entrance of a whole pack of boys, with Miss Royce in their midst.

"Well, Mother," she cried, "we are just soaking, every one of us! It came down in a perfect torrent, up on the hill, with scarcely a moment's warning:—and it looked so beautifully settled and fine when we started! Out on the common, you

know, there is nothing to take shelter under, or in, for half a mile or more from where we play; so, as the boys were wet through before we reached the nearest house, I thought the wisest plan would be for them all to run home as fast as possible."

"Much!" exclaimed Mrs. Royce, shortly and concisely, adding a moment afterwards,—“I think they had better all go straight off to bed, instead of changing and coming downstairs again;—yes, that will be the best plan—for you and Miss Baxter as well as the boys—and I and the servants will bring your tea up to you all.”

“Oh, that will be joyful,
Joyful, joyful, joyful,”

sang the Scamp, excitedly, kicking off his boots with an energetic jerk.

Fortunately for him, none of the teachers heard him thus adapting these two lines of the well-known hymn to the expression of his own mundane approval of such a plan, or surely he would have been reproved for making light of serious matters; though *un*fortunately for Jack Smedley, one of the discarded boots, flying straight as an arrow across the hall, alighted right upon that unconscious young gentleman's back, as he stooped down to untie his laces, causing him to jump up with a cry of startled alarm, that speedily turned off into a threat of retaliation, as he caught sight of the Scamp's visage opposite him, expanded in a broad grin of mirthful glee at the unexpected turn which events—to wit, his boot—had taken.

But before such a threat could be executed, Sam had made a rush past him, and was soon heading the stampede towards the bedrooms, two steps at a time.





CHAPTER XXIV.

NEITHER RHYME NOR REASON.

HERE, in less than half an hour, the Scamp was pronouncing a thorough drenching such as this, "rare fun," and sadly lamenting that it could not happen much oftener; for, somehow to-night, the tea tasted far less like "slops," and the "bread and scrape" seemed to have turned over a new leaf, for if the proportions of the bread and butter had not actually changed places, at any rate the former seemed much thinner and the latter much thicker, sitting snugly here in bed, than ever they did upon the bare mahogany table below stairs.

And then, when the cups and plates were taken away, and it was still much too early to think of going to sleep, we started games amongst such as cared for them, whilst others sent for books to read, and one or two, with much forethought, asked for their lesson-books, intending to prepare the morrow's tasks over-night, so that, for once, they need not wake early in the morning as usual, in order to learn them before the bell rang for getting up.

Though, first of all, Mrs. Royce had gone the round of all the beds, accompanied by Anne, bearing in her hands a tray upon which stood a piled-up basin of lump sugar, and the camphor bottle, and had administered to each of us one lump a piece, well saturated with this cold-preventive;—a fact which

somewhat marred the pleasure of scrunching up our much-relished morsels of sugar.

The Scamp, however, cunning and cheeky as ever, coolly helped himself to another lump from the basin, "just to take out the taste of the first one," he said, grinning, when he found that Mrs. Royce had noticed his little trick, in spite of his stealth in waiting until she had passed on to the next bed, and Anne was left standing alone in the gangway between them. But she only smiled back at him, and called him "an incorrigible Scamp," which was a marvellous piece of humour coming from her, and showed, plainer than anything, in what a pleasant, kindly frame of mind she was.

By degrees, however, the interest in the various games gradually subsided, as, one by one, the players began to fall victims to a feeling of drowsiness, occasioned by the soothing and comforting effects of tea, medicine, and bed combined. Only a desultory conversation had been kept up for some time past, when Will Knowles suddenly startled us by exclaiming, "A penny for your thoughts, Mat!"

"And another for your words!" echoed Freeman, for Mat was busy scribbling upon a bit of blue paper between the leaves of his book.

Mat, thus challenged, looked half sheepish and half pleased, but required a little further pressing, before he would volunteer any information as to his literary occupation.

"Why, you see, I've been learning my French lesson, and I was thinking how dreadfully hard some of the words are to pronounce. Then, when I came to look over my spelling lesson, it struck me that, after all, it must be far harder for any foreigner to know how to pronounce English, for such lots of words are spelt just in the same way, and yet they are not a bit alike in sound."

"Hear, hear! Very learned and clever!" cried the Scamp, in accents of affected patronage.

"Well, and what's the writing about?" urged Willie Knowles.

"Oh! I—I—don't like—to tell you!" and Mat looked highly pleased, but very bashful.

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed Sam, jumping briskly out of bed, and peeping inquisitively over Mat's shoulder. "Here! I shall take it over to the window to read; it's getting so dark, I can't see here;" and so saying, he seized the paper, and ran off with it.

"I shall go under the clothes, if you are going to read it out loud, Scamp!" Mat cried, feeling much more confused than offended by Sam's interference; for that young person, after throwing himself into a mock heroic attitude, had given forth sundry growls, meant for an attempt at clearing his throat, and now read aloud these lines:—

"Three noble horses, just unharness'd from the plough,
Stand calmly drinking at a wayside trough—
Fed by a tiny streamlet from the neighb'ring lough:
Th' impatient plough-boy, waiting till they've had enough,
Munches his home-made cake of currant dough—
Nor likes it less because it's not baked through."

"Very good, young 'un! very good!"

"Well done for a youngster!" sang out Will Knowles and Freeman in a breath, whilst I turned towards Mat with a face almost as expressive of pleasure as his own, though in the company of so many of my superiors, both in years and wisdom, I did not venture to add my own congratulations openly.

"Well, that's the sort of thing I *mean*," said Mat, emboldened a little by this warm encouragement; for Smedley, and Johnnie Harris, and all, were loud in their expressions of approval, too. "You see, those words all *look* as though they *ought* to rhyme, and yet they don't in the least, do they? And there are some all the other way,—rhyme when they don't look as though they would, and are pronounced exactly alike when they are spelt quite differently."

"Ahem! Ahem!—Such as these, for example!" cried the Scamp, turning over the sheet of paper, and looking at Mat, with a mischievous smile upon his lips.

"Oh, I forgot that!" exclaimed Mat, piteously. "Oh, don't read that, Sam; please don't! It's too silly! It is, really."

But Sam was inexorable. Indeed, we all clamoured so loudly to hear it, that he could not do less than read Mat's second effusion, which ran thus:—

"Lobsters alive are black, I'd read,
But those that I had seen were red,
Until one day, when claw'd by one
('Twas an experience hardly won!)
I vow'd I never more would wade
In search of shell-fish,—for it weigh'd
Three pounds;—I'll bet as much in steak,—
And if I'm wrong, I'll eat my stake!
Since then, no artist's critic eye
Could paint them blacker than do I."

"It was too bad of you to read that, Sam; it was, indeed!" said Mat, as soon as the Scamp had finished. And then, as though anxious to turn the conversation away from the discussion of his compositions, he continued, as soon as the laughter was somewhat abated, "There are heaps of other words with just the same sort of peculiarities; don't you think it must make it very difficult for a foreigner?"

"Certainly," replied Willie. "I quite agree with you; but then our grammar is so much easier—we score there! You see, we have no bothering genders, like the French and the Germans, and all the rest of them, and that's a world of consolation in itself.

"We can talk comfortably and safely about a table, or a bed, or anything, without any horrid misgivings as to whether we ought not to have called it a 'she' instead of a 'he,' and whether, in that case, we have been right all the way through our sentence—articles, adjectives, pronouns, participles, and everything!"

"Why don't you say 'a lamp-post'?" put in the Scamp, slyly, ever on the watch for an opportunity to chaff Will Knowles, upon what he was pleased to term his "gawky" figure.

"For instance—'The lanky Lamp-post, was she not beaten in her race this afternoon?' Wouldn't that sound well, eh?"

Before Willie could make any reply to this brilliant sally, Sam surprised us all by making a sudden dash across the room towards his bed, saying in an undertone, from which no amount of caution could dispel the evident mirth and jocularly, occasioned by his impromptu attempt to parody Mat's verses,—

"Cave! Beware, boys!—for if I
Don't hear 'Her' coming,—green's my eye!"

In he dived, down went his legs to the bottom of the bed, and up went the clothes over his shoulders in an instant; but, in spite of his hurry and bustle, he had not been quick enough to avoid detection. For Mrs. Royce—whose abrupt entrance at once explained the mystery of Sam's flight—had evidently caught a glimpse of a white-robed figure, flashing nimbly across the room like a streak of bright light, for, in a tone of some displeasure, she inquired, "Who was that out of bed?"

No response. But away in Sam's corner, only a suspicious sound of not-too-evident snoring, as though the drowsy sleeper slumbered uneasily just now.

"Sam Camp, was it you who were out of bed?" she reiterated, apparently doubtful of the sincerity of Sam's unusual sleepiness, at this early hour.

Still the same broken sounds of heavy rest were the only response from that quarter.

"Pretty audacious!" I thought to myself—"even for the Scamp! And whatever shall we say if she asks *us*? He will be in for a row, as sure as a gun, if she *does* worm it out of us, and finds that he has been humbugging her all the time."

But my meditation was cut short by an odd incident, which took place just at this moment.

"Where's Sam? Where's the Scamp?" suddenly asked a voice, which, though it had a queer, unusual ring about it, I had no difficulty in recognising as Smedley's.

He had come running into the room in a strangely fussy and excited manner, never appearing to notice the presence of Mrs. Royce, as she stood in the centre of the room, peering through the fast-gathering gloom, to try and discover some trace of the culprit who had evaded her recognition so narrowly; or surely the very sight would have been enough to have sent him scampering back to his dormitory, if he had merely come to this one for a "lark," as I supposed.

We sat bolt upright in amazement, when we saw his temerity—Will Knowles, I, and the others who were still awake—watching and listening with anxious interest.

"Where is he?" repeated Smedley, in a hurried, hoarse, indistinct sort of whisper. "Miss Royce said he would be sure to come to the gallows, some day, and now I have come to hang him."

Good Heavens! Here was a tragedy going to be enacted before our very eyes!

What could it all mean? Was the fellow mad, or—?

"Asleep!" whispered Willie Knowles, with an expressive grimace, supplying by that one little word the key to the mystery, as well as the blank pause in my unfinished question.

Then I remembered having heard that Smedley had been known, once or twice before, to walk in his sleep, and how I had been warned not to feel scared, if ever *I* came in for a share of his attention; as well as instructed never to wake him suddenly, as one of the boys in his fright had done, by hurling his pillow at him, with all the added force gained by his fear and alarm, felling the unfortunate somnambulist to the ground with a violence which brought him at once to his senses, though at the expense of a severe shock to his nervous system.

But what was he up to, now?

Giving vent to a succession of odd little jerky sounds, and muttering volubly to himself, he trotted up to the dressing-table, fumbled restlessly about for awhile, and then, having found something, apparently, to suit his purpose, walked

straight over to the Scamp's bedside. Then we saw that he had possessed himself of some one's brush-and-comb bag, carrying in his other hand a bottle of bear's grease pomatum, from which the glass stopper had been ominously drawn.

At the bedside he stopped, laid down the bag upon the counterpane, and pulling out the strings as far as they would stretch, carefully twined them round and round in a coil.

"Poor Scamp!" he muttered, compassionately, apparently reflecting upon Sam's well-known regard for his inner man; "he must have something to eat first, eh? Ha! ha! ha!" and he laughed a vacant, silly laugh, as though dimly conscious that he was doing something amusing.

"Pff—ff—ff—ff! Gah! Gah! Gah!" spluttered poor unhappy Sam, jumping wildly up in bed, and vigorously spitting out the mouthful of bear's grease with which he had been bountifully regaled, before Mrs. Royce had taken any steps to interrupt the performance. For the whole scene had taken so short a time to enact, that Smedley's quick, rapid, jerky style of saying and doing things had hurried him on to a partial execution of his strange purpose ere Mrs. Royce had planned to herself the best and most judicious mode of arresting it.

It was impossible to avoid a little suppressed titter, when we saw the Scamp's frantic contortions of loathing and disgust, and reflected how he had partly brought it upon himself, through his first pretence of being fast asleep—a ruse which obliged him to feign a continued semblance of slumber, even whilst Smedley was hovering over him, bottle in hand; and yet the scene left such a sense of weirdness upon our minds that we were too much awed to do more than giggle, uneasily, in hushed tones.

"Come, Johnnie," said Mrs. Royce, in her blandest and most soothing tone, advancing to Smedley's side, and laying a hand gently upon his shoulder, as he stood staring up at the still-dancing Scamp; "see! you have waked Sam now, and he is always so lively when he is awake. You have lost your

chance this time, so you had better come back to bed now."

Smedley turned his face towards Mrs. Royce, as though endeavouring to comprehend what she said to him, and through the dim light I could see the whites of his eyes glaring fixedly, and knew that his eyelids must be wide open.

Then, in the same quick, hurried manner, he jerked himself away from under her hand, and exclaiming, in a thick, husky whisper, as though addressing himself, "To bed; to bed! Rats! rats!" away he darted at the top of his speed, back to his bed, for all down the long corridor resounded the pit-a-pat of his bare feet, galloping over the ground as fast as his legs would carry him. How we did laugh at poor Sam, as soon as Mrs. Royce had closed the door behind her!

Blustering and choking, he was off his bed in an instant, and contrived to keep us all in continuous fits of merriment, by the extravagant manner in which he spat, coughed, and spluttered, as he stood swilling out his mouth at the washstand, breathing forth all kinds of imprecations upon his would-be executioner, between every fresh mouthful of water.

Dinner-time came the next day, but the excitement of the previous evening had afforded so much mental food for discourse and recital, one to another, that all other minor subjects had been thrown aside. Therefore, the scrap of conversation that I had overheard the previous day, which had been so aggravatingly and abruptly broken off as soon as my presence had been discerned, never crossed my memory again, until the actual occurrence to which it related took place, recalling it all to my recollection with fresh distinctness, whilst it explained at once the whole enigma of the boys' remarks.

On this particular day of the week, regularly appeared—for the second course—a huge, round pudding of boiled rice, moulded into a stiff, solid mass, as big and as smooth as a good-sized, well-used foot-ball, and served up with abundant sauce, composed of melted butter and brown sugar,—this last

all the sweeter, and none the less objectionable to us, on account of its deep colour. Indeed this was the only palatable portion of the dish to me. I had always conceived so intense an abhorrence to rice, in any shape or form, that it was only sheer fear at the idea of what a refusal might involve, that had ever compelled me to touch it, upon the first day on which it came to table after my first arrival at the school.

And having partaken, on that occasion, until my neck and jaws actually and literally *ached*, and my throat stubbornly refused to pass another grain of the obnoxious pudding, I had been thus physically forced to acknowledge that I didn't like rice, and could not eat any more of my bountiful helping.

Ever after that, rather to the envy of some of the other boys, I had been excused from any further struggle with my share, and had generally been treated, instead, to a scrap of Mrs. Royce's cheese, which, in spite of its "stingyness," was ever so much more edible than the discarded rice.

So that, this day, I excited no surprise by passing on the plateful handed to me first, as usual, to my next-door neighbour. But to my astonishment, he, too, passed it on, and the next, and the next, and so on, all down the long table.

Mrs. Royce looked up, as she poised the next plate in the air, ready for me to pass down, and caught sight of the first one still seeking diligently for a resting-place at the foot of the table and—like Noah's dove—finding none.

"Whatever did you pass that on for?" she inquired, rather sharply; but the remark being addressed to the company generally, no one attempted a response. "It was intended for *you*," she proceeded, turning to Harry, who sat next to me; why did you not keep it?"

"I don't wish any, thank you," replied Harry, faintly, stretching his hands nervously beneath the table, and looking covertly up through the corners of his eyes, to watch the effect of his words.

"'Don't wish any'! How is that?"

But there was something on the faces of the boys that told its own tale directly, I think ; for Mrs. Royce—judging from the quick glow that darkened her complexion so suddenly—divined in an instant that there must have been a deliberate conspiracy planned to reject the unpopular and unsavoury pudding, when next it should be offered to our satiated palates.

At the same moment, the whole reason of the boys' mysterious secrecy and guarded speech, shot through my mind, as the words, "Oh, he's all right ! he never touches it," dawned upon my remembrance with a fresh meaning.

"Boys !" exclaimed Mrs. Royce, in as calm and collected a voice as she could assume, "what is the meaning of this conduct ? I do not intend to have any nonsense, so you will just eat what is set before you without further remark. Rogers, send that plate back to Harry, and you"—looking sternly at Harry—"pass this one on to Mat Davis. It is perfectly ridiculous, as well as highly disgraceful, for boys like you to profess to turn up your noses at good, wholesome food, such as this."

At these words, up went Sam's "snub" in a regular wriggle, for the plate had reached him, that very moment, upon its return journey ; though whether the rash act were suggested by Mrs. Royce's remark, or whether it were merely the spontaneous exhibition of his personal disgust at the "good, wholesome food," I cannot say.

Whichever it were, it was an unfortunate mode of expressing his opinion, for Mrs. Royce was steadily watching the progress of the despised dish, as it slowly retraced its steps to its original destination, and saw the expressive grimace, with all the offended dignity of one whose words have been adopted only too literally.

"Sam Camp, go to your room this moment !" she broke out, wrathfully, and Sam, with a look of studied indifference for himself, and silent contempt for those of his fellow-conspirators who had so meanly deserted their colours at the first onslaught

of the enemy, rose deliberately from the table, and marched slowly towards the doorway.

"Take this with you," said Mrs. Royce, sharply, holding out a plateful of the despised pudding, over which she had purposely omitted to pour any sauce.

The Scamp marked the omission, and determined to repay good for evil by supplying some of his own!

"*I WON'T!*" he cried, with such incredible energy and decision, that I declare it made half of us jump upon our seats.

Surely, if hair ever did stand on end, ours would have bristled stiffly, to hear such startling audacity as this flat refusal, and the laconic mode of expression which accompanied it. But it was his last effort, for, as though too much alarmed himself at his own temerity, to care to wait to face the consequences, he bolted from the room, and flew upstairs to his bedroom, two or three steps at a time.

"Rude! impudent! obstinate! boy!" exclaimed Mrs. Royce, in firm, slow and emphatic jerks, wrathful at having been so flatly and publicly insulted. Then, with a violent effort, she checked herself, and instead of rushing after the Scamp, as we all sat breathlessly expecting her to do, she spoke to Miss Baxter with as much composure as possible: "Miss Baxter, I must trouble you to take this plate up to Sam at tea-time. I shall not allow him to have anything else until he has eaten this; and until then, he must remain upstairs."

"Very good," meekly acquiesced Miss Baxter, apparently not over well pleased with her commission.

Brave and dauntless as they had all declared themselves, so short a time previously, even when the certainty of a "row" had been calculated upon and freely discussed, every one now succumbed under the awing effects of Sam's dismissal, as easily as Napoleon's army was routed and defeated after the capture and loss of their brave and inspiring leader, or—if you prefer it—as easily as ices melt in your mouth on a hot, sultry day in July.



CHAPTER XXV.

"SCAMP'S DELIGHT."

THAT same evening, after tea, I was seated quietly at my desk, deeply engrossed in the perusal of that fascinating child's book, "The Swiss Family Robinson."

Little it mattered that this was the second time of reading, for though the freshness and novelty were, of course, somewhat wanting, yet the incidents and experiences which this most truly remarkable family encountered and suffered, were far too exciting to lose their interest by a first recital.

But why had the *Swiss* Family such a very downright *English* name? And what a splendid woman that Mrs. R—— must have been! for surely, such forethought and anticipation of coming emergencies, as exhibited by her in the unfailing production from her mysterious bag of every conceivable article, whenever most wanted and least expected, were never heard of before, and would have been qualities great and rare enough to have raised her, had she been placed under other and more favourable circumstances, to the highest pinnacle of glory and renown, wherever foresight and tact were the qualifications most eagerly sought after and faithfully rewarded.

These were the two thoughts that had puzzled my brain for the last few pages, but the tale was too absorbing to be interrupted by any such vain and trivial ponderings as these; so up went my hand to my forehead again, and down sunk my head

upon my breast once more, as I leant earnestly over the book.

Bang! Some one had shut up my book with a rude, sudden jerk.

I looked up hastily, with a shout of anger and surprise. Ah! it was Rogers. Who else but he would have served me so mean and aggravating a trick?

He seated himself sideways upon the form, a little distance from me, and regarded me with so steadfast a stare of menace and defiance, that I stifled the rising exclamation of wrath, and turning away from him with an ill-disguised motion expressive of disgust and impatience, slowly reopened my book.

But in my nervousness and anxious desire to appear as cool as possible, I hunted aimlessly about to find my place, and even when that desired end was attained, though I fixed my eyes steadily upon the page before me, my mind drank in nothing of the meaning of the words that I gabbled over, again and again, to myself, in the vain hope that by constant repetition I might drive out that dread suspense of coming evil, which hung over me like a dull, black cloud.

"S—n—e—a—k!" slowly spelt out Rogers, as he sprawled carelessly over the desk, his head resting on his hand, and his eyes—cruel, hard eyes—fixed immovably upon my fast reddening face.

I took no notice—apparently!

"S—n—e—a—k!" repeated the voice, with slow and deliberate emphasis.

Still no outward sign of the inward tempest raised in my heart by such uncalled-for provocation.

For though I kept my eyes glued to the page lying before them, only a confused, tangled mass of lines and letters presented themselves, blurred and blotted, to my mental vision; whilst my brain, instead of grasping the sense of the writing, was in a perfect whirl of distraction, through which chased one another, in rapid succession, the oft-repeated thoughts, "What

will he say next? What *shall* I do? Oh, how I hate him! loathe him! detest him! Oh, how I hate him! detest him! loathe him! What *shall* I do? What *will* he say next?" and so on, over and over again, backwards and forwards, in one continuous stream of bewilderment and suspense.

Then in order to "make believe" still further, I turned over a leaf, with an assumption of indifferent unconcern intended to appear as though his provoking insult caused no interruption to my literary pursuit, as well as to persuade myself that I really understood the paragraph I had been mumbling over to myself for the last two minutes, and was anxious to proceed with the account of the stirring incident which it described.

But my patience was to be tried yet more sorely.

Finding that his attack, couched in this style, did not rouse me as he expected, he changed his tactics and his position, and sitting bolt upright, rattled off rapidly, with scarcely a pause for breath,—

"Sneak! sneak! sneak! sneak! sneak! sneak! sneak!" repeating the words without limit as to time or number, until my head fairly swam at the maddening sound.

Well, I was roused now, at any rate! If that was his desire, it was amply fulfilled.

Clenching my tongue between my teeth, and casting upon him a look of bitter anger and hatred, I slid hastily along the form, and struck him.

No word passed. I felt too bitter and wrathful for utterance, just at present, but the hard, sharp, stinging slap proclaimed the state of mind into which I had been lashed by his irritating epithets, more plainly than any verbal expression would have done.

Then I slid back to my seat again, and pretended to go on with my reading.

Pretended, I say, for with such a war raging, conflict must ever be the order of the day, secretly as well as visibly, and any peaceable occupation is necessarily out of the question.

Almost before I had regained my place, Rogers followed me, and in another moment I was suffering a small agony from the result of a violent "dig in the ribs."

Little Reader, can you remember what a "dig in the ribs" feels like? Do you know what it is to have all your wind knocked out of you, and to gain in its place a dull, lingering pain, whose effects are noticeable long after the first gasping struggle for breath has passed away?

If so, you can appreciate my sensations now. My first quick impulse was to rush furiously upon my enemy, and engage in pitch battle, even at the imminent risk of a defeat, but even as my hand was uplifted in retaliation, this thought flashed through my brain, and made me pause:—"Hullo! You are the chap who professes to want to be a peacemaker; and yet you can't even hear another fellow call you a 'sneak,' without striking one blow first, and then wishing to follow it up with a regular fight. A fine peacemaker you are, certainly!"

My hand fell listlessly to my side in suspense, but Rogers took advantage of the lull to break out savagely, "Why don't you run and tell Her that I've been calling you names? Go on, now,—quick, quick—before it's too late—before your shoes wear out!"

There was no standing such an aggravating speech as that, calmly, with my temper at boiling point as it was now; so away flew all my qualms of conscience about peacemaking, just as though they had never entered my head at all.

"Why can't you leave a fellow alone, Rogers?" I cried indignantly. "You are a great, mean, cowardly GIRL,—that's what you are! No one but a *girl* would go on like you!"

Out it came, with such bitter emphasis upon the word "girl," that nobody could fail to appreciate the utter contempt which the tone, quite as much as the word itself, was intended to convey.

It stung Rogers to the quick, as it was intended to do; and with a glare of passion in his eyes, although his lips emitted a

short laugh—irritated and contemptuous, it is true, but still a laugh—he retorted, sharply,—

“A *girl*, am I? Well then, I’ll just let you know what a *girl’s* fist feels like: then, perhaps, you won’t be so fast again with your long tongue, you mean, little, sneaking rascal!”

Just then, Bob North came by, with Johnnie Harris and some others, and Rogers, placing a strong restraint upon his itching fingers, fell back upon verbal weapons with which to prosecute his attack, and called out,—

“Bob, what does ‘s—n—e—a—k’ spell?”

“‘Bernard Ayres,’” quickly responded his chum, to whom the question was apparently no fresh one.

“Right. Now spell ‘Bernard Ayres’ in three letters.”

“‘P—e—t’” was the prompt reply. Evidently, too, this variation of the old riddle was no novelty to either of them, although it had never before been publicly repeated in my presence.

“Right again! I say, Bob, ‘tisn’t fair for this youngster to be let off eating his share of rice, is it?”

“Certainly not. If She makes us eat it, She ought to make him, too,” remarked Bob North, logically.

“Yes,” struck in Johnnie Harris, with some gusto; “if he won’t eat rice, I’m sure he ought not to be allowed to have cheese.”

“Oh dear! dear!” thought I, “how you do get in for the kicks, when once you are down!”

“He shan’t, either!” replied Rogers, answering Johnnie Harris’ observation, and striking the desk with his clenched hand as he spoke, the more strongly to emphasize his remark. “Look here, youngster, will you take your solemn ‘davy never to touch a morsel of cheese again, whenever we have that vile rice to swallow,—even if She offers it?”

I looked sullenly down upon the desk, my eyes fast growing misty with tears.

“Will you?” he repeated, threateningly, snatching away my book ere I could lay a detaining hand upon it.

"No, I won't!" I answered, doggedly; though with faltering lips I added, half apologetically, "I never swore in my life."

"'Swore'! ha! ha! that's good! Did you hear him, Bob?"—for my last remark had been uttered faintly, half under my breath, as though suddenly fearful of appearing too stubborn-willed without some excuse or reason for my refusal. "He says he 'never *swore* in his life.' That *is* rich! Ha! ha! ha!"

My lips quivered still more suspiciously, as I pleaded, "Well, but isn't that what you meant by my 'solemn 'davy'?"

Another shout of derision was my only answer. Being so suddenly bereft of all occupation—or semblance of occupation, rather—I lifted the lid of my desk, and propping it, school-boy fashion, upon my head, pretended to grope about among the contents inside, though really more intent upon concealing the tears that were beginning to drop off the tip of my nose.

"You *won't* promise?" pursued Rogers. "Then I'll very soon wring a different answer out of you. I wish I had got a tubful of rice *here*: I would just cram it down your throat, till you choked!"

"Oh, Rogers, what a barbarous idea!" laughed Bob North, slightly shocked at his friend's exaggerated mode of expression, but anxious, nevertheless, to keep well 'in' with him. "Happy thought! why not make him eat the Scamp's plateful—that would be killing two birds with one stone, wouldn't it?"

"Good! that's a brilliant notion. As soon as we go upstairs to-night, and it's all quiet, we will."

Not content with the prospect of such a splendid opportunity for wreaking the revenge upon me which he had so long threatened, Rogers must needs avail himself of another chance which caught his eye at this moment.

Jumping to his feet, he seized the lid of my desk, raised it perpendicularly, and let it fall smartly upon my head, before

I had sufficiently divined his purpose to escape the cruel blow.

Ah! little Reader. If you have not experienced a "dig in the ribs," perhaps you have felt the cruel effects of a heavy desk-lid falling sharply upon the back of your head, just where the two partings in your hair separate and start off in opposite directions. If not, you should try it at your earliest opportunity, if you would fully appreciate the pain that such a blow inflicts upon your skull—hard though it may be!

You would not be so much surprised, then, when I confess to having set up a howl that startled the whole schoolroom, silencing every noisy tongue on the instant, as each one turned from his pursuit, wondering what the sound could possibly mean.

Mat was seated with his back turned towards us, perched up upon a high stool at Willie Knowles' desk, for the proprietor himself was just then busily engaged in assisting Smedley with some extraordinary culinary operations at the fireplace.

Mat turned round with a bright flash of sudden anger rising in his eyes, and before any one had recovered from his surprise enough to speak, the usually shy, quiet, little fellow's voice broke the silence excitedly. "What *have* you been doing to him, Rogers? Why can't you leave him alone, you great bully? You ought to be ashamed to bully a little chap like that;—only I don't believe you have a bit of shame about you!"

"Hullo! just hear Mat!" jeered Rogers, chaffingly. "*He* is going to set up for a saint, too, ha! ha! ha!"

But no one echoed the laugh.

Mat had turned round upon his seat again, bashful and confused, for his habitual diffidence and reserve had returned, as swiftly as the anger which had given him courage for his indignant outburst had come and gone again.

It was so unusual for *him* to break out like that, that his words—when such a rare event did happen—carried far more

weight and influence with them than any other fellow's in the school,—not even excepting brave, out-spoken Willie Knowles.

And now, as the boys marked his heightened colour, and the boiling indignation of his tone, the silence lengthened out for a few seconds, as one looked at the other in slight amazement, whilst one or two elevated their eye-brows with an expressive look of wonder.

Rogers looked uncommonly sheepish, after the ill success of his first retaliating advance, and Bob North appeared equally foolish and uncomfortable ; though the former did his best to shake off his embarrassment, and muttered aloud something about his "bullying Mat in a minute, if he didn't take care."

Then a voice, braver than the rest, suddenly gave vent to a mild cry of "Shame !"

But the cry was caught up, and echoed on all sides, so that Rogers—victim in his turn of the fitful, shifting tide of popular indignation—followed my example and retired ignominiously behind the friendly shelter of his open desk.

Certainly, it was a foolish step to take, in the face of the still unforgotten results of such a course ; but when "Shame !" is being cried from all quarters, one does not stop to reflect upon probable or possible consequences.

But though *he* didn't, Harry Morland did. With a promptness and decision such as he had shown when acting as my self-constituted champion, on the first day of my arrival here, he ran nimbly forward, and boldly catching the lid of Rogers' desk, let it fall back upon the unexpectant victim's head, just in the manner in which he had seen me treated.

Rogers uttered a yell, more of anger than of pain, and sprang briskly from his seat, ready to rush off in pursuit of his little tormentor ; but the shouts of laughter which had greeted this requital of his former barbarity to me, showed him plainly that the sympathies of the majority were not on his side, making him pause to consider whether it might not be better policy on his part to postpone his dreams of vengeance, until

some more favourable opportunity offered ; for "bullies"—you may take it as an axiom—are almost invariably cowards.

So he turned, and went slowly back to his place, amidst the jeers of the spectators, whilst Willie Knowles, seeing me vigorously mopping at my eyes, even though my face wore a smile of pleasure over Harry's bravery, in so warmly taking up the cudgels on my behalf, called out to me,—

"Here, little 'un, come over and help us."

He had risen from his crouching attitude in front of the fire, and had been standing, the last few minutes, to watch the disturbance, holding in his hand a small tin box, in which were deposited the results of his and Smedley's cookery.

This is what they had been doing.

Not content with devouring every ordinary part of the oranges upon which he had expended his substance, the Scamp had recently invented a system for rendering the very peel itself, if not exactly palatable to most people, at any rate edible by-such as ourselves. And the idea having found wide favour in the eyes of the school, it had now become the rage, with big and little alike. Though I expect the chief secret of its popularity was to be found in the fun which the "cooking" occasioned, for what boy is there in the wide world, that does not take a mischievous delight in playing with fire? and if with no excuse, why then, without!

Cutting the peel into long, thin, wafer-like strips, he and his many imitators placed them in rows within a small tin box. This they then deposited in a sort of natural oven, formed on each side of the grate by the false hobs and sides, which had been inserted inside the bars in order to reduce the width of fire, with a view to economy in the consumption of coal. Against these iron plates, they would rake up the hot, burning coals, until the heat was great enough to frizzle up the orange-peel, after a sojourn there of ten minutes or so.

"That sounded like 'Bible,'" said I, as I approached the two temporary possessors of the much-prized "oven."

"What did? 'Come over and help us'?"

I nodded an assent.

"Yes," returned Willie. "I noticed it myself as soon as I had said it."

"Well," laughed Smedley, "if the Bible *will* use words that express *our* ideas as well as its own, what *are* we to do? we can't help quoting them! And I don't see any harm, either."

"*She* does," I rejoined, reflectively. "She always comes down upon the Scamp for it like—like—"

"A thousand of bricks!" suggested Smedley.

"I think she is right, remarked Willie, gravely. "It is just as well to avoid that sort of thing, when you can, because if you constantly hear certain expressions repeated lightly and thoughtlessly, they are almost sure to lose their real force and meaning to you for ever afterwards. Besides, it isn't a very reverent habit to get into, to say the least of it."

Willie Robson and Harry Morland came running up now, to inquire into the success of this batch of "Scamp's Delight" as it had been dubbed, and to know whether they might put the result to the test by tasting a bit each.

"Let me look in, will you please?" pleaded the head-cook's small namesake, stretching eagerly on tiptoe to peer into the contents of the little tin box. "Ow! ow! it's hot! how *can* you hold it so? Doesn't it burn you?"

Willie Knowles let the small hand that was pulling so lustily at his arm have its own way without resistance; so that, from peeping to tasting being no long remove, we were soon all scrunching up the burnt, brittle bits of thin peel, that had rolled themselves up into such a variety of contorted forms during the agony of fire and heat: trying to persuade ourselves mentally, and each other verbally, that "Scamp's Delight" was really very nice, and not in the least like crisp, smoky charcoal.



CHAPTER XXVI.

"GUNPOWDER TREASON AND PLOT."

WE saw no more of the Scamp that day, until we went to bed.

"Well, have you eaten it?" asked Freeman, eagerly, as soon as we were left alone.

"Yes," replied Sam, evidently crestfallen at having to make such a confession, though to me it was an immeasurable relief to hear such an avowal; for now, if Rogers should have the will to carry out his threat of cramming the rice down my unwilling throat, he would not have the means, since Sam had got rid of the plateful which had been designed for the commission of the deed. "But you needn't kick up such a row as that over it, for I declare I wouldn't have eaten it till Doomsday, if Miss Royce had not asked me to," continued Sam.

"Miss Royce? Have you seen Miss Royce? Did she come in here to see you? Was she dressed? How was she? Did she look bad?" were a few of the questions that broke forth simultaneously from a dozen beds at once. For Miss Royce had stood the drenching of the previous day the worst of any one, and had been in bed all day from the effects of a bad cold brought on thereby. And every one was anxious to know about her, for the school was nothing without Miss Royce at the head of it:—so we all thought and said.

"Miss Baxter brought that vile, hateful plateful of rice up

for my tea," the Scamp continued, "but I wouldn't touch it, and I told her so. Then Anne was sent up with it at supper time, but she smuggled up a great big ham sandwich along with it,—the old brick!—oh my! it was good!—for she said she knew I must be hungry, and she didn't wonder at me turning up my nose at boiled rice, for she didn't like it herself—'couldn't bear the smell of it even, let alone the taste,' she said. Well, then Miss Royce sent for me—Miss Baxter nearly caught me eating the sandwich, I had to cram it down my throat like a greedy fowl that has seized a bigger piece than it can swallow!—and she gave me such an awful 'jaw,' all about the worry that her Ma was in, what with *her* illness, and our behaviour, and everything, and how I oughtn't to do anything to vex her, after all her trouble and kindness yesterday. I couldn't stand all that, from her, so I offered to eat it, there and then: and I did, too—and she was so pleased! And I'd eat the whole pudding, if *she* asked me to, that I would! At any rate, if I choked myself trying, I'd have a go, just to please her,—she is such a reg'lar onner," and Sam, in his enthusiasm, doubled up his pillow, and dug his teeth into it, as though in illustration of his sincerity in offering to start work there and then, if necessary.

The fifth of November came, and still Miss Royce was not able to leave her bed. Indeed, these last few days she had grown worse instead of better, and was now in so critical a condition, that we were thrown into a feverish state of suspense and doubt as to the possibility of carrying out the programme of jollifications customarily arranged for this day, the preparations for which had been occupying our minds, and employing our fingers, for some little time previously.

But our minds were set at rest at dinner-time, by an announcement from Mrs. Royce, to the effect that though *she* had originally decided against the holding of these festivities just now, yet that Miss Royce had begged so hard that the boys' pleasures should not be foregone on her account, that

she had been over-persuaded, and had consented to yield both this point and another, over which she had had a verbal tussle with the invalid,—viz., that if no worse towards evening, her daughter should be allowed to be wheeled to the window for a few minutes, for the two-fold pleasure and excitement of catching a short glimpse of the whole school collected *en masse*, and of having a peep at the display of fireworks, which was to take place upon the lawn.

So now we could put the finishing touches to our 'Guy Fawkes, as well as to the bonfire in which he was to be consumed, without any haunting uncertainty as to the crowning issue of all our labours.

How queer it would seem not to have Miss Royce amongst us, directing and superintending everything! And stranger still, to fancy her lying upstairs, muffled up in wraps and blankets, and supported by a multitude of pillows and cushions,—her whom no one could remember to have seen laid by with a single day's illness before, and whose high spirits and lively disposition had made every one forget, or overlook, the possibility of such a catastrophe happening to her.

As soon as ever dinner was over, away ran Willie Knowles and Mat, to join Anne and John in the back kitchen, where Guy Fawkes was waiting—propped up against the pump—to be arrayed in his funeral attire: whilst Freeman and the Scamp scampered away to blacken their faces, and robe themselves in such a dress as they considered consistent with the orthodox costume of an ancient executioner. So when at length they put in an appearance, before the expectant crowd of their admiring companions, we discovered that they had adorned their persons by tying coloured scarves across their shoulders, and fastening belts around their waists, in which latter they had each stuck a wooden sword of home manufacture, but sharpened and pointed, nevertheless, to a degree which was apt to be almost dangerous upon occasions, when rather too freely used; whilst Sam, to render his appear-



"A MIGHTY SHOUT GREETED THE APPEARANCE OF OUR EFFIGY."



ance still more ferocious, had, in addition, a blunt old hatchet and a rusty billhook, which he had hunted from the recesses of the wood-shed to fasten at his waist.

He had borrowed little Willie Robson's Inverness cape, which, hanging from his shoulders, reached only a little below his waist, and with trousers rolled high to his knees, and one of John's soft felt hats slouched low over his eyes, he looked a perfect model of a small ruffian, for out of the black griminess of his corked face, the whites of his eyes, and his gleaming row of teeth, showed up startlingly white and distinct from the very contrast, when his mouth—as generally happened—was expanded in a broad, pleased grin of satisfaction.

We must have presented a strangely amusing sight to an uninitiated spectator, as we gathered, a motley group, before the porch steps, and waited impatiently for the appearance upon the scene of the hero of the day.

Nearly all of us had turned our coats and waistcoats inside out, and many had tucked their trousers up to their knees, turning down the brims of hats and peaks of caps, in accordance with the mysterious impression under which small, unruly urchins, all the world over, seem to labour; namely, that, by such doings—so fascinating and agreeable to their hearts—they can manage to transform themselves from innocent, harmless-looking, small boys into veritable types of ferocity and ruffianism personified.

What a mighty shout greeted the appearance of our effigy, when at length it was borne aloft into the midst of the excited group, upon the shoulders of Willie Knowles, who, indeed, found it so unwieldy a bulk to bear steadily, that Mat was obliged to lay restraining hands around the pole upon which the figure had been constructed, in order to keep him from staggering under its weight! It was a splendid image and no mistake! and there was some excuse for Anne's smile of pleased satisfaction, as she hovered round, looking up at the successful result of her share in the handiwork.

John had routed out a long, stout stick, and had bound all round it great bundles of hay and straw, which Anne, in her turn, had covered with rags and good-for-nothing old cloths.

Between them, they had managed to manufacture arms and legs, whilst, to complete the effect, Anne had made a splendid straw-stuffed head, with a really well-formed nose—"every bit as good as his," the Scamp said, feeling his own short, cheeky-looking snub critically, as he surveyed the other's nasal appendage with a great deal of admiration, and no little envy of its superior outline.

Willie and Mat, too, with Smedley's assistance, had, on their part, beautified the production of Anne's skill, with a plentiful coating of dauby paints, brilliant and varied as any clown's patchwork decorations in colour.

Coal-black eyes, scarlet lips, cheeks blotchy with crimson and gamboge, showed up well upon their white background, whilst from under the slouched hat, great patches of carrotty paint represented the auburn locks of the miscreant; though it must be confessed that a judicious regard to their stock of colours, and an eye to the general effect, guided the taste of the artists in depicting the principal features of their subject, rather than any strict attention to the details of History—which Muse, however, is not, so far as I know, particularly explicit upon this knotty question.

The whole form of the doomed victim was enveloped now in a long, loose smock-frock, begged for the occasion from Mr. Robbins—the "washerman," as we always used to call him.

For the Scamp, with his usual intrepidity and cheek, had attacked Mr. Robbins without the smallest hesitation, as soon as the idea had entered his head, and had been so far fortunate as to have the loan of a disused smock granted him, upon the sole condition that it should be taken off, just before the body that it was intended to cover was finally committed to the flames. This time there was no formal procession, as there had been months ago at the funeral of the white mice. The Scamp and

Freeman, as executioners, walked one each side of the figure and its bearers, but the rest of us ran on ahead, or on each side, or followed hard in the wake, just as fancy led, though all seemed to agree as to the shouting, hooting, and uproar, that every one appeared to consider necessary to the importance of the occasion.

By the time we arrived in the playground, the great bonfire, for which we had been gathering and stacking fuel all the morning, to which John had set fire during dinner-time, was crackling and blazing away splendidly. So fierce and high the great forked tongues of fire were leaping, that it was as much as ever John could do to fix the stake upon which Guy Fawkes was impaled, firmly and securely in its proper position in the centre of the pile, without scorching his hands, or singeing those long whiskers of his, of which he was so extravagantly proud, and about which we were always chaffing and plaguing him—calling them "Piccadilly weepers," and "onion roots," and the like—to his no small annoyance and chagrin.

We gave three wild cheers, led of course by the Scamp, as the hungry flames shot up, and fastened round their victim with the fierce rapacity of a horde of savage cannibals; then cheered more lustily still, and laughed ourselves well-nigh hoarse, when old Guy gradually bowed his hideous head lower and lower, "as though he had got a 'crick' in his neck," Will Knowles said; until by-and-by, a struggling, ambitious, little flame shot its arrow tongue a trifle further than its other straining neighbours, and pierced its way right into one of the big, staring, dauby eyes.

"It has soon given him a black eye, hasn't it?" said Sam, exultingly, quite as much interested in watching the *destruction* of the effigy as he had been in inspecting its *construction*.

When the fire had nearly burnt itself out, and poor Guy was lying a defaced and unrecognizable heap of charred ashes across the smouldering sticks, we amused ourselves by roasting potatoes "with their jackets on," in the still glowing embers,

according to a good old custom which had appertained to the school ever since Guy Fawkes had been first burnt in effigy there.

No matter whether thoroughly cooked or not, so long as they were soft enough to dig our teeth into easily, and sound enough to throw from one to another, whilst still so hot that it would bring the tears to your eyes if you held them in your hand, more than a few brief seconds at a time.

"What *are* you doing, Scamp?" asked I, curiously, as I watched Sam carefully rolling up some coarse brown paper into long, tight cylinders.

The Scamp's sole notice of my remark was an expressive wink, and a mysterious thrusting of his tongue into his cheek.

"Going to have a smoke?" inquired Johnnie Harris, whose attention had been attracted by my observation, and who, being an older bird than I, was more quick in divining the object of his elaborate preparations.

Sam nodded.

"So shall I, then! Only *I* shall cut some of that cany sort of stuff out of the hedge: that makes better cigarettes than brown paper *or* cabbage leaf."

So it came to pass that by the time Mrs. Royce next arrived upon the scene, after returning from a brief visit to her invalid daughter, her sight was startled by the alarming spectacle of some twenty or so home-made cigarettes, manufactured in cane, cabbage leaf, and brown paper, protruding ostentatiously from as many pairs of thrust-out, grimy lips.

It was impossible to help smiling at the effect produced by so absurd a scene, for most of the boys, unconscious of her presence, were strutting about giving themselves such airs of importance as they considered in character with the dignity of holding a cigar, real or sham, between their teeth.

Even when the news spread rapidly that she had come back, and half the boys threw their burning weeds away—"weeds" literally, in many cases, as well as slangily—whilst others took them from their mouths and held them doubtfully between their

fingers, the Scamp held bravely on to his, and tried hard to puff out still denser clouds of smoke than he had been doing hitherto.

But when a teacher or a ruler laughs, it is generally all up with their pupils and their subjects, afterwards, as regards order and decorum, so we were not very much alarmed for the consequences in this case.

"Oh, Sam! Sam! I am shocked. I begin to fear you are quite incorrigible; for I suspect, if the truth were told, that *you* would be found to be the ringleader of this piece of folly,—as usual:—would you not?"

Sam grinned, but said nothing.

But Mrs. Royce was not at all angry; only rather shocked, as she said; and perhaps a little amused too. For, to every one's surprise and pleasure, she said that as the Scamp had led us into such mischief, we might follow him out of it in the same manner, just for this once, but that if such conduct were repeated on any future occasion, or upon the sly, she should be very much vexed and displeased, and should visit her displeasure upon the culprits, without any further warning.

"Even now," she continued, whilst her eyes twinkled good-humouredly, indicating her secret amusement,—“even now, I expect most of you will be served out for your rashness in following so foolish an example, in a way which will have far more effect upon your minds and memories, than any words or punishments would have, which I might choose to inflict upon you.”

At length tea-time had come and gone, and once more darkness brooded over the face of the earth.

Darkness which to-night, at any rate, was destined to be rudely disturbed and broken in upon, by the variously-proportioned but unanimous efforts of all grades of society, from street-Arabs and gutter-boys up to the professional pyrotechnist whose stupendous exhibitions display all the art and skill of which his inventive genius is capable.

What though ours might have been but a meagre display

compared with many, or most, of these? To us it was a marvel of charm and novelty, and probably the Roman candles, the rockets, the Bengal lights, and the squibs and crackers, afforded us more wonder and delight than do the elaborate set pieces, the marvellous showers of stars, and beautiful cascades of fire, which dazzle the eyes and startle the admiration of the spectators before whom their glories are unfolded.

And then what a spree it was to send the crackers whizzing in amongst the crowd of village urchins, who annually congregated down at the gate, to look on at the gorgeous spectacle, with eyes and mouths wide open in bewilderment and wonder. In their eagerness and impatience, they would egg one another on, a step at a time, until, at length, the foremost ranks had been pushed forward, almost to the edge of the lawn. You should see the rush back again, though, in spite of their closely-packed numbers, as soon as some fiery missile came flying into their midst. You should hear the screams, and then the merry peals of laughter, from the girls, as they hastily snatched up their petticoats, and hopped about in pretended agonies, fearful lest the treacherous crackers, or the phizzing squibs, should get entangled in their dresses, or explode beneath their feet. You should listen to the shouts of the boys, as they scrambled pell-mell for the prize, and tried who could secure it first, to throw back amongst the ranks of the enemy. But fiercest, loudest, most excited of all, rose the shrieks of mock horror and the disdainful cries of derision, when a deceptive cracker, lying black and unsuspecting upon the ground, went off with a sudden puff and bang, just as some timorous youth had seized the treasure between his fingers, and had raised his hand in the very act of hurling it back amongst us.

Then at a given signal from Mrs. Royce, Miss Baxter, Will Knowles, John, and Anne, each set fire to four coloured Bengal lights, placed at different angles of the broad sweep of the carriage drive, whilst Mat, Smedley, and the Scamp, each lighted one of a group of three placed triangle-wise in the centre, right

in front of the windows. All the rest of us stood huddled together in so many groups, dotted about on each side and behind this central illumination, our eyes and our thoughts wandering swiftly from the brilliant blaze of bright-hued fires to the window at which we knew this general flare-up would afford us a glimpse of Miss Royce, as she sat watching for the flood of light which was to discover to her all the well-known features, so sadly missed of late, standing out in bold relief of black and white, bright light and deep, dark shade.

Yes, there she was ! Propped up by a huge pile of pillows, the burning lights illuminated her familiar features almost as brightly as they did ours, the red tint of the nearest flame casting a soft, ruddy glow over her face, that concealed from us the sad fact that those usually rosy cheeks had grown thin and pale, and the eyes dim and listless, during the last fortnight. Now, as she saw all our merry young faces upturned towards hers so eagerly, she raised her hand, and kissed it to us, with a sweet, faint smile of greeting.

"Hip ! hip ! Hoor-r-rah !" shouted the Scamp, excitedly, dancing and cutting capers in the exuberance of his spirits at seeing a sight to which his eyes had been so long unaccustomed, but which caused them to sparkle gleefully now, in spite of the sorrow that saddened all our hearts to see her for the first time so.

Little Willie Robson, as soon as he caught sight of Miss Royce's graceful salutation, kissed his hand back to her, with so much fervour and persistency, that directly the cheering had subsided, his example was followed by every one else, even some of the villagers, who recognized the object of our energetic greeting, joining in with hearty alacrity. So the Bengal lights burnt fainter and duller, casting their paling tints upon a perfect forest of waving hands and nodding heads, whilst the flickering flames just afforded us a parting glimpse of our beloved teacher, as she was peremptorily wheeled back to bed by the nurse in attendance, who evidently feared the effects upon her patient of too long a strain upon her nerves, or too great a mental excitement, in the present weak state of her health.



CHAPTER XXVII.

EXILED.

ANOTHER week passed slowly, and Miss Royce had grown so alarmingly ill that for the last three days the doctor had paid his professional visits both morning and evening. And now, to-day, he had come again a second time, whilst as yet it was only half-past twelve o'clock. We were just out of school, but all was so still and quiet now, about the house and grounds, that, but for the different nature of our pursuits, no one could have told whether it were play-time or not.

And I? I had been miserable ever since we had missed our teacher from the daily scenes, where her bright, cheery presence had always been so welcome and so grateful. And now, to-day, I had been seized with an intense desire to hear from the doctor's own lips how long it would be before he could promise that his patient should be downstairs amongst us once more.

I was not a bit afraid of Dr. Young; I had been under him myself already, for some trifling, childish ailment, and looked upon him ever since as one of my prime favourites. For had he not generally something kind and amusing to say, some interesting story to relate, or—better than all—something either palatable or pretty, to transfer from his pocket into mine?

So now, having waited about downstairs so long that I was fairly tired of staying and watching in vain, I determined to saunter to the upper regions, and plant myself outside the door,

where I should be sure to see him first, and where I should not be so liable to the constant disturbances to which I was subjected down here, with so many boys and servants flitting to and fro, wondering to see me loitering about so curiously.

So up the stairs I crept, and seated myself upon the mat at the threshold of the sick-room door, propping my back against the angle of the wall and leaning my weary head against a projecting moulding, running round the doorway.

How long they were! Would they *never* come out? How wretched and dull it was to have any one dangerously ill in the house, and ten times more so when that some one was Miss Royce! But hark! At any rate some one inside was as miserable as I was, for surely that faint, stifled sound was like a person trying to suppress an involuntary sob; and at the bare thought, my own tears, that had been on the very verge of my eyelids for so long, began to trickle slowly down my cheeks, and fell warm and moist upon my fingers, as I sat with hands encircling my bent-up knees.

Suddenly and noiselessly, the door opened, and these words struck softly upon my ears, chilling my heart as I listened:—

“It would be cruel kindness for me to attempt to hide it from you, Mrs. Royce,—her life is hanging by a thread.”

The next moment the doctor caught sight of me, and uttered a short, quick exclamation of surprise, which, however, with habitual caution and thoughtfulness, he strangled in its birth.

“Hullo!” he cried below his breath, “who is this?” and stooping down, he raised me gently to my feet. Then he looked about from the weeping mother to the sobbing child, with a bewildered look of concern upon his kindly face.

“It is little Bernard Ayres,” explained Mrs. Royce between her sobs; “he is very fond of my poor dear Jenny. But he ought not to be up here, though; perhaps you will kindly take him downstairs with you.”

“Oh, Dr. Young, I only wanted to see you, just to ask when you were going to make Miss Royce well enough to

come downstairs again :—but if her life is ‘hanging by a thread’—” I couldn’t finish my sentence, but with a fresh sob, I slipped my hot hand out of his, so pleasant and cool, and ran off to my own room as fast as I could.

“‘Hanging by a thread!’ ‘Hanging by a thread!’” I kept repeating to myself, as I lay spluttering and half choking upon the bed, just where I had first thrown myself in my misery.

For only a week ago, when the reading lesson, as usual, was going on simultaneously with the drawing class, it had fallen to the Scamp’s lot to read a certain passage, which had left a vivid impression upon my mind ever since.

It was an extract from the History of Greece, and besides being attractive to us on account of its own intrinsic interest, it had roused our attention all the more, owing to the loud and spirited manner in which it was given forth by the reader. For if the style of composition struck the fancy and suited the taste of the Scamp, he became one of the best and most impressive readers in the school, and upon this occasion so contagious was his evident interest in the descriptive matter which the scene contained, that he quite enchained the faculties of many of his auditors ; so that, presently, some of them stopped their sketching to listen more closely, whilst Mat laid down his pencil, and sat back upon the form, eyes and mouth both wide open in fixed attention. I will not trouble to transcribe, word for word, the paragraphs that fell to Sam’s portion to read, couched as they were in the quaint, dry, matter-of-fact mode of description which most historians find it necessary to adopt ; but this, briefly, is somewhat how it ran :—

“It is related of Dionysius the Tyrant, that when obsequiously pronounced by the wily and crafty flatterer Damocles to be ‘the happiest man on the earth,’ in order to convince him of the sort of happiness which a sovereign enjoyed, he invited him to be present at a sumptuous banquet, at which he caused him to be arrayed in royal robes, and treated with all the pomp and ceremony of a monarch.

“During the entertainment, which was of the most costly and magnificent description, and whilst Damocles was revelling in all the luxurious elegance and brilliancy by which he was surrounded, his eye was suddenly attracted, and his attention arrested, by a sight which was alarming enough to make the stoutest heart quail, and the darkest cheek blanch to an ashy paleness. For, straight above his head, suspended by a single horsehair from the lofty ceiling, hung a glittering, jewelled sword, threatening an instant and swift destruction to the victim immediately beneath its naked, gleaming point.

“Instantly, the intoxication of pleasure and delight were exchanged for the delirium of fear and agonizing suspense. The treasures of gems and gold, the profusion of rare dishes and choicest fruits, the strains of finest music, the sight of sparkling wines, the dusky beauty of the jewelled female slaves, the heavy odours of a thousand fair exotics,—none, none of these voluptuous pleasures afforded any longer the faintest sense of gratification, or stirred the keenest passion of a heart chilled by the sudden haunting dread of death.

“Thus was strikingly typified the ‘happiness’ of a tyrant.”

So now, as I lay there, sobbing and moaning, my babyish, literal imagination pictured my own dear Miss Royce lifted, for only just one moment, by such a thread as this; and I knew at once how hopeless an impression such a simile must needs be intended to convey. It would snap, it would break, just with her very weight!—without any external force or pressure, or anything of that sort; so there could be no hope,—none,—none! The next day, Mrs. Hughes called, and remained for some time in the drawing-room, alone with Mrs. Royce.

As the result of this close confabulation, the report soon got wind that all the boarders were to be packed off that very afternoon to Rose Cottage. The rumour proved correct, and the announcement was soon formally made that Mrs. Hughes had kindly volunteered to have us all to her house, and would allow us to remain there, until either Miss Royce had recovered sufficiently to admit of our return to the school, or our various

parents should have arranged to have us home for awhile. For the doctor had, to-day, given as hopeless a verdict as that which I had heard fall from his lips the previous morning, and Mrs. Royce's natural anxiety about her only daughter, combined with the responsibility and care of looking after such a number of boys, was proving altogether too much for her state of health and spirits. So that she was only too thankful to be able to snap at any plan, which afforded relief from one source of her troubles, particularly when such a course could be adopted, with as great confidence and propriety, as it could by accepting the present timely offer of assistance.

In less than an hour, therefore, a line of vehicles drew up, down at the great gates, and thither we all marched, in solemn detachments of fours and fives, each carrying in our hands a little bundle of just the absolute necessities for sleeping out ; for no one knew how soon we might come back again, if things turned out better than was expected, whilst, on the other hand, it was impossible to tell yet who of us might be summoned to spend their time of exile at their own homes.

How strange and queer it all seemed ! Such a strong suggestion of happier times and holidays, to see those cabs waiting down there, to take us away from all the well-known haunts and familiar sights and sounds ; and yet in place of mirth, and laughter, and merry faces, nothing but sorrowful, downcast countenances, and quiet, demure looks. Some such mingled sensations beset us, as might well be experienced, I imagine, by a wedding-party, who, instead of wearing the customary spotless emblems of purity and joy, should be shrouded from head to foot in all the dreary, solemn blackness of mourning garbs.

Mrs. Hughes received us with all her usual hearty kindness, and exerted herself to the utmost to keep us occupied and amused, and to prevent our thoughts from ceaselessly running upon the sad cause which had given rise to our visit to her. As soon as tea was over, she set us off playing games to our hearts' content. The Scamp was the first to propose one, but was very *mysterious* as to how it was to be played, and, in fact, turned

all of us out of the room who confessed their ignorance on the subject, after having listened to his very guarded explanation of how it was done. By-and-by it was my turn to be called in.

"D'you see that sixpence on the ledge of the shutter, there?" asked Willie Knowles, coming up to me, with a white silk neckerchief hanging across one arm. I nodded an assent.

"Well, if you can touch that three times running, blindfold, you shall have it!"

"Of course I can't! But I'll try!" I replied, pleased though bashful—for all the boys were staring at me, with evident interest in the proceedings.

"Oh, but I'll lead you, and I'll promise to lead you quite straight,—honour bright!"

"Ah! then some one's going to take it away, as soon as you have tied up my eyes."

"No, they won't, indeed."

"Will you promise?"

"Promise. Now then, can you see?"

"Not a bit!"

"All right. Come along then," and Willie, taking my hand in his, led me forward at a good brisk pace.

"There, that's *once*!" cried two or three, as my finger, held out like a pointer, struck up against the silver coin, ere I was aware that we were in its neighbourhood.

"*Twice*!" exclaimed the onlookers, apparently as much interested as myself. "You have only to do it once more and it's yours!"

I ran back to the starting-place, a good deal excited, and very much pleased with my success. Two out of three wasn't bad, and if only Will Knowles wouldn't cheat, I should come off conqueror. Off we set, once more. Straight ahead went my finger, and surely, now, in another second, I must feel the smooth surface of the well-worn coin. Aha! though, whatever is that odd sensation suddenly shooting through my finger?

Oh my! it's harder and sharper now, and makes me kick with surprise and agony; and in the twinkling of an eye I am

aware that my finger is in some one's mouth, securely held between a double row of very firm and perfect teeth.

Off comes the bandage from my eyes, and amidst the shouts of the spectators I behold—as I half suspected—the pert visage of that wretch, the Scamp—grinning up at me with as broad a grin as ever his clenched teeth would allow his lips to stretch to.

Just at the last moment, he had placed his head right in front of the sixpenny-bit, opening his big, cavernous mouth, to admit my unfortunate finger, at the very culmination of its course, when the success of the two former attempts had rendered me confident and unsuspecting. This, of course, was the very pith and climax of the whole game, and like many another of a similar nature, was more agreeable and amusing to the onlookers and the performers, than to the victim who is so unconsciously lending himself as a mark for their united diversion and entertainment.

"Well, how do you like it, young 'un?" demanded Willie Knowles, untying the knot in the scarf, as he spoke. "I led you quite straight each time, as I promised, didn't I? But you got rather more than you bargained for, eh?"

"I don't like it one bit!" I exclaimed, rather sulkily, as I surveyed the dents all round my finger, left behind by Sam's sharp teeth. "I think it's a stupid game!"

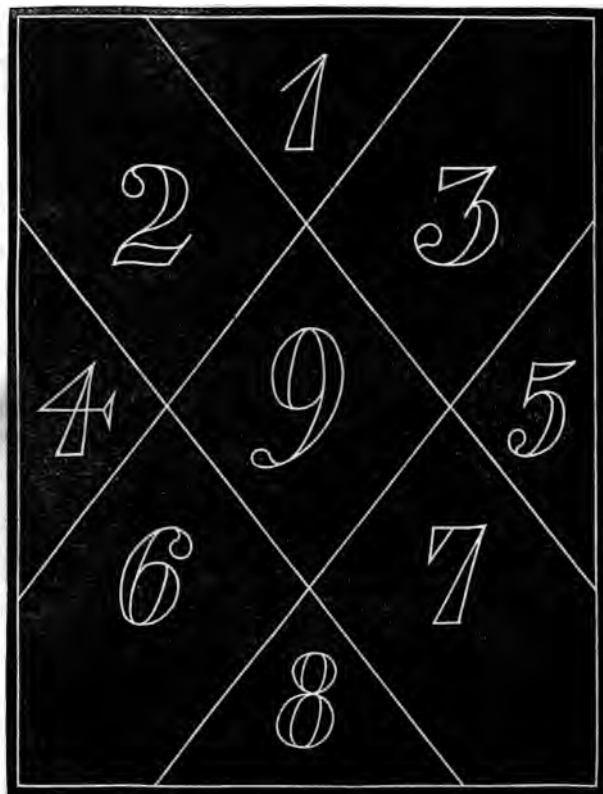
Nevertheless, two minutes later, I was enjoying the fun of watching the next martyr as much as any one else. It happened to be Rogers' turn, next to mine, and I think the Scamp must have brought some of his personal dislike to him into the game, for when Rogers felt Sam's teeth fasten round his fingers, he uttered such a yell of anger, and made so determined a rush upon the operator, as soon as ever he could disengage himself from his clutches, that Mrs. Hughes was obliged to run forward and interfere, in order to keep the peace.

"Come, come, boys! I can't have any quarrelling here. I will tell you of a better game than that to play, although it is something like it."

So saying, she bade Willie Knowles fetch a large black-board from its place in the other room, calling little Mary to

her at the same time, and whispering something in her ear, which had the effect of sending that little lady scampering out of the room with pleased alacrity. They both returned very soon; Willie with his unwieldy burden, and Mary heavily laden with two great glass dishes, piled high with ginger-breads and nuts.

We were all attention to the proceedings at this sight, as you may well imagine, and eagerly watched Mrs. Hughes' movements, as, with a piece of chalk, she ruled out sundry spaces on the black-board and filled them in like this :—



"There!" she cried, rising from her knees, and stepping back a pace to view her handiwork the better. "Now, Willie, prop this up against yonder wall. Yes, that will do nicely. Now you must all take it in turns, to walk from here up to the black-board, blindfold, just as you were doing just now, and whatever number you strike, you can take out that quantity in gingerbread or nuts, as you please."

"Hi! Will!" cried the Scamp, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes; "if you'll promise to lead me straight up to the '9' every time, I'll do ditto for you."

"Ah, Sam, you are too sharp!" laughed Mrs. Hughes; "I ought to have said, 'just as you were doing just now, with the exception that no one is to be led,' for, without such a condition as that, the dishes would very soon be emptied! Besides, half the fun and excitement is in seeing what bad shots people make, if left to themselves, when they have some little way to walk." Every one agreed that this was a much nicer game than the other. The only fault to be found with it was that our turns were so long in coming, and so quickly over!

It was far more difficult to walk straight than any one would have supposed, and lots of the boys walked right up against the side walls, to every one else's satisfaction but their own.

The Scamp, too, in spite of all his loud bragging, went off at such an angle that we really thought, once, that he was going to turn round and come back again.

"My father says—" began Harry Morland; but a general shout nipped his remark in the bud, for Sam, after a second equally vain attempt, had made a splendid shot the third time, and had hit the black-board right in the "bull's eye," as we dubbed the "9," expressing all the while so much surprise at his success, that I am inclined to think his brilliant achievement was to be explained by the fact that the bandage across his eyes was not quite so straight this time as it was when he first started.

Harry's opening remark of "My father says" was, moreover, so well known as to have passed into a proverb amongst us,

and many were the jeers and insinuating questions that the constant repetition of such a speech gave rise to. Sam, for instance, after rallying him with one of those attacks of badinage and "chaff," out of which *he* always came victorious, would wind up his observations by asking, in his most cutting tones, "What would your father say to that?" and turn off upon his heel, with a self-satisfied laugh, as though this last remark had quite given the settling blow to the discussion.

Consequently, Harry's familiar opening remark was allowed to pass unheeded now, until, becoming impatient to give vent to it, he laid his hand heavily upon Smedley's shoulder, and repeated again:—"My father says, that at some palace or other in France,¹ there is a certain lawn, across which people *can't* walk straight—blindfolded. Some of them make right for the side directly, but lots of others turn gradually round, and come back to the very end from which they started, although to do so they are obliged to walk *up* hill!"

Presently the stock of prizes came to an end, and we were therefore forced to change the game.

This time "Mesmerism" was proposed.

The little side table was dragged forward into the centre of the room, and upon this were placed two saucers, one of which was scrupulously clean, whilst the other had been previously held in the smoke of a candle, until the bottom was thickly coated underneath with a black, smutty film, which came off readily at the slightest touch, thereby auguring well for the future success of the entertainment.

At each side of the table a chair was placed, and in front of the one where Mrs. Hughes seated herself was placed the saucer which had undergone such careful preparation, the clean one being set down before the vacant chair. Both saucers were then filled with water, almost to the brim, so that any one raising them from the table would have some difficulty in holding them sufficiently steady to prevent their contents from

¹ Versailles.

spilling over. As soon as all was ready, Mrs. Hughes motioned to me to creep under the table, and take my place at her feet, where I was to perform my small part in the interesting ceremony. Mat stood behind her chair, holding a small hand-mirror, carefully concealed behind his back.

Then the victims were called in, one by one, performed upon with more or less success, according to their various dispositions, as well as to the presence or absence of any disturbing suspicion lurking in their minds, and then hurried away to a safe hiding-place behind the curtains of the bow-windows, from whence they could peep out and watch the proceedings, without any fear of spoiling the fun by a premature exposure of their strangely-altered visages to those who came after.

We purposely left the Scamp out until the last, feeling sure that the best fun was to be extracted from his ridiculous behaviour, and it was only fair that as many should witness his antics as possible.

My office had been that of "nipping machine" under the table, but I was so anxious to see the effect upon Sam, that I got Harry to change places with me. Slipping out from under the cloth, I took up my position beside Mat, close behind Mrs. Hughes' chair, and directly opposite the place where he would sit. Harry didn't want much pressing—to have the chance of pinching the Scamp's firm, fleshy calves with impunity was not an opportunity that offered itself every day.

"Allow me to introduce you to Her Majesty the Queen of Sheba," said Willie Knowles, pompously, leading the Scamp forward by the hand, and stopping him a few paces off, to make a low reverence to Mrs. Hughes. "Come, no larks now, Scamp!" he cried, in slightly less solemn tones, for Sam was pulling his forelock, with a comical expression on his good-tempered face, intended to set us off laughing; and it would never do, for the success of the performance, to allow him to begin "humbugging."

Every one can understand the feeling that comes over a

person, when he is well aware that he is about to be made a fool of before a large number of his associates, and is painfully conscious that any amount of "swagger," which he may choose to display, will not enable him to avert such a fate.

And so the Scamp, half amused, half awed and subdued, took his seat quietly, as directed, and prepared himself, in some trepidation, for the approaching ordeal.

"It affords me much gratification, Major Camp"—here the Scamp sniggered at so obvious an allusion to his peculiar weakness—"to welcome you this evening to my royal table, for, believe me, the fame of your nation generally, and of yourself, more particularly, has penetrated even to the remote country over which I have the honour of reigning ; and it is, therefore, with feelings of the greatest pleasure and satisfaction, that I see that countenance before me, which, for so long a while, it has been my ambition and desire to behold."

"Bow ! bow !" exclaimed Willie Knowles, impatiently, and thus urged, the Scamp inclined his head stiffly, though in silence.

"But before we proceed to partake of this bountiful supply of soup," continued Mrs. Hughes, "which you observe forms the first course of the sumptuous repast about to be placed before you, you will, I am sure, allow me so far to trespass upon your good-nature and gallantry, as to ask you to comply with that etiquette which always pertains to these ceremonies in our country, and to do, not only as I ask, but as I do. May I take it for granted that you will honourably fulfil these conditions?"

Mrs. Hughes paused for a reply. Sam looked slightly foolish, as though his senses were somewhat addled by the harangue to which he had just been subjected.

"Her Majesty waits for your bow of assent," remarked Willie, loftily ; adding, directly afterwards, in an every-day kind of tone, "Nod your head, *stoopid* !"

Sam did so, and Mrs. Hughes proceeded.

"Should you at any moment feel tempted to falter in your

promise of doing exactly as I do, or of removing your eyes from mine, during any period of the time occupied by this curious and interesting rite, I have, beneath the table, a machine, ready, upon a signal from me, to inflict upon you a passing remonstrance, which shall act as a gentle reminder of your engagement.

"The first interchange of civilities consists in the ancient and time-honoured custom of exchanging the vessels from which we eat or drink.

"Slaves ! (clapping her hands, in orthodox oriental fashion) to your duty !"

At this summons, Willie Robson and I stepped forward, and whilst he took Mrs. Hughes' saucer, I took the other, and with much care and caution removed it to the opposite side, without spilling a single drop of water.

"Now, Major Camp," began Mrs. Hughes again, "you must hold your platter in the left hand, thus —, and passing the forefinger of your right hand three times in a circle round the bottom, make a pass across your forehead, from one temple to the other,—so— !"

The Scamp, slightly bewildered with all these directions, but totally unsuspecting, implicitly obeyed.

"Now, Sir, again, if you please ; but this time, the sign of a circle around your lips and mouth, as you see me doing."

The result, soon, was almost too much for our risible faculties to withstand, for Sam, with blissfully unconscious confidence, was fulfilling every command so minutely and vigorously, that already the result was a more complete decoration of his features in black and white, than any of the others' had been when finished.

The stifled commotion of suppressed merriment amongst us, made him look up ; but only for a brief moment, for Mrs. Hughes, seeing his wavering attention, had significantly pressed Harry with her foot. Only too keenly alive to the pleasure of pursuing his vocation upon so promising a subject, Harry waited for no second bidding, but at once applied his fingers

to the Scamp's calves, with a vigorous tweak that made Sam jump upon his seat, kick out his legs, and give vent to a sharp yell of surprise and pain, managing dexterously to hold on to his saucer, meanwhile, in spite of his eccentric bodily contortions.

"Oh, I say, Mrs. Hughes, that *is* too bad; he did give me *such* a twinge! Won't I pitch into him, presently, just about!—whoever it is under there."

"Major Camp, you forget yourself!" interrupted Mrs. Hughes, smiling, but still anxious to bring the sport to a successful issue. "Her Majesty the Queen of Sheba is not used to be addressed as 'Mrs. Hughes,' and moreover, Sir, you were warned of the consequences of the slightest inattention to any portion of this formal ceremony.

"And now, Major," concluded Mrs. Hughes, when the operation was brought to a highly satisfactory termination, "perhaps you might like to behold your countenance in a mirror: do you consider that your locks are in that order which you would desire, when dining in state with royalty?"

Sam, still unsuspecting the horrible reality, was thrown still more off his guard by this remark, and hastily putting a hand to each side of his head, tried to smoothen and flatten down the untidy masses of hair, which he felt conscious were sure to be flying about in their usual profusion, all round his eyes and over his forehead.

"Slave of the silvered glass, advance!" cried Mrs. Hughes, clapping her hands, as before.

I shall never forget the look of utter, blank astonishment and dismay, that broke all over the Scamp's face, as Mat came eagerly forward, and presented the looking-glass full in front of his eyes.

He turned and twisted the glass from side to side, and ogled and peered, as though he fully believed that there must be some extraordinary peculiarity or flaw in the mirror, that could reflect to him such a grimy, smutty, besmeared visage, as that which stared stolidly back at him from out of the little polished oval frame. All the boys came bursting forth from their hiding-

places, as soon as they heard his first startled exclamation, and crowded round, laughing and jeering, and looking every whit like a lot of North American Indians, tattooed and decorated for a village war dance. It was too much for the Scamp.

With a sudden burst like the explosion of damp gunpowder, he threw down the mirror upon the table, and tumbling sideways off his chair, rolled upon the ground in an agony of convulsive mirth, until he finally disappeared under the table, to engage in friendly combat with willing Harry Morland.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE STEED AND HIS RIDER.

Two days passed, and the third broke upon a scene of perfect loveliness, for far and wide the earth was covered with a vast, boundless cloak of glistening, spotless snow, whilst the trees all around the house looked like so many giants, bending under the weight of the heavy loads they bore upon their many branching arms.

"SNOW! SNOW! SNOW!" were the three words that startled the quiet sleepers from their heavy slumbers; and those whose dreams were not disturbed by the first sound of the Scamp's voice, must have been firmly slumbering indeed, if they were not aroused by the time he gave vent to his third exclamation, for each was uttered with such increasing emphasis, that the last ended in a regular shout of mingled pleasure and surprise.

"Hur—r—r—ra—ah!" cried Willie Knowles, responsively, leaping out of bed, wide awake in no time. Rushing full tilt to the window, he nearly pushed the Scamp through the glass, in his eagerness to scratch off some of the night's frozen moisture, that he might see out the better.

"You great, clumsy, gawky lank!" exclaimed the Scamp, with affected indignation, using his favourite epithet, as usual when he intended to be particularly crushing towards Willie Knowles. "You might have pushed me through that window

then that would have smashed the glass then that would have cut my fingers then I couldn't have used my hand then I couldn't make any snow men or houses nor make snow-balls to shy at you—then there wouldn't have been any use in the snow coming at all!" and Sam—disdainful, as ever, of any pause, or of the ordinary rules of punctuation—wound up his voluble remarks with a sudden gasp for breath wherewith to refill his exhausted lungs.

"There would be other people in the world, who could enjoy the snow, I suppose, even if *you* were laid up," returned Willie, laughing. Meanwhile other excited youngsters had come crowding up to the window, shivering in their night-shirts, but never heeding present discomforts, in the pleasant anticipation of the fun in store for them after breakfast.

Harry Morland had come dancing up, echoing his hero, Willie Knowles' exclamations in as lively tones, though with a slightly different accent, as he shouted, "Hooray! hooray!" and capered round Mat with a series of bounds and threatening embraces, that made the less impulsive object of his notice retreat out of the way, in evident disinclination for his advances.

As soon as ever breakfast was over, away rushed all the boys to put on their boots and hurry out into the snow. This was a rather longer operation than usual, for Mrs. Hughes had directed Eliza to bring in a great bowl of mutton dripping, and had recommended all of us to rub it over our boots, to prevent the damp from penetrating, a proceeding which many of the boys discovered to be highly interesting and entertaining.

For reasons best known to my own heart, I had slipped back to the sitting-room, instead of running out with the rest, and had been there, silent and alone, only a few minutes, when I heard the sound of light footsteps passing the doorway.

Then they paused, as if in uncertainty about something, stood motionless a moment, and then, turning sharp round, pattered back to the doorway, and stopped short upon the threshold. Mat's hat and head, peering doubtfully round the

door, met my eyes as I raised them from the book which I was professing to spell over.

"Why ever don't you come out to play?" he asked, in much surprise. "They are having such fun round in the garden, building a real snow-house, roof and all! I have been hunting everywhere for you. I couldn't think what on earth had become of you, or wherever you had got to! Come along."

"I don't want to," I answered, with rather a dejected air.

"Don't want to?" echoed Mat, in astonishment. "Don't want to? Why ever not? I always thought you were so fond of the snow."

"So I am. But oh, Mat! how *can* I, with *her* life 'hanging by a thread'—it *must* break soon—even if it hasn't done so already." I made my remark so earnestly, though very quietly, that I think Mat's eyes began to fill, and I know mine did.

Poor little fellow! He, too, was as fond of Miss Royce as ever I could possibly be, and perhaps I had wounded his feelings, by unintentionally implying that he was less keenly alive to our mutual sorrow than was I. "Oh dear, dear! it's just dreadful!" he said, presently, with a deep-drawn sigh.

Then, after a few moments' contemplation of the big, crackling log, which the servant had thrown on the fire ten minutes ago, he added, gently, "But I don't think *she* would wish us to stay here, moping, and making ourselves miserable, would she? Because we couldn't do her any good by it, and we might do ourselves harm. We needn't be thoughtless and indifferent, even if we do try to distract our thoughts or divert our minds a little, by joining in the games. At any rate, I know *she* would not consider us hard-hearted, for playing about and trying to enjoy ourselves, as far as we can."

"Very well!" I answered, only half convinced; "I'll come, if you like." The boys had got on finely with the snow-house, by the time we got outside; for the snow—though only one night's fall—was deep, and in splendid binding condition.

Already the walls were all up, and Will Knowles was direct-

ing the labours of those who were attempting to arch a roof over them. Sam was busy hacking a window through the centre of one of the solid side-walls.

"Come inside, and see how jolly it is!" he called to us, as Mat and I stood peeping in from the doorway; so in we marched, and soon made ourselves useful by clearing away the blocks of snow, as fast as he dug them out of the thick, massive wall.

"Look out for avalanches, inside there!" cried Willie Knowles, laughing; and the same instant, down slipped one of the big blocks that he and his assistants were attempting to hoist into position, right at our very feet.

"Lucky it didn't come upon our heads!" remarked the Scamp, drily, with some show of wisdom in his speech, for once.

But all difficulties were overcome eventually, and before long, the building was completely finished, roof and all, much to the satisfaction and delight of those whose efforts had been so signally crowned with success, in spite of every obstacle with which they had had to contend. So in we all crowded, to rest from our labours, and to discuss what was next to be done.

Willie Knowles, as head builder, and general ringleader of the whole affair, sat in the centre of a raised seat, which we had constructed at the far end, and covered over with a strip of oil-cloth, lent us for the purpose by Mrs. Hughes, the Scamp and Smedley supporting the president upon either side.

All sorts of things were proposed. Sam wanted to have a regular snow-ball pitch battle,—one division of our ranks attacking the snow-house, whilst the other defended it as their fortress. This, however, was negatived, on the ground that it would be a pity to demolish the building, so soon after all the trouble and labour we had just spent upon it.

Freeman suggested erecting a tremendous heap of snow, with steps to the top on one side, and, upon the other, an inclined plane from the summit to the ground, down which we could take it in turns to slide, just as he had heard of the

Russians doing at St. Petersburg, upon the artificial ice-hills constructed upon their frozen river, the Neva. But this plan also was opposed, on the score that the snow would be too soft to be slippery, and would be liable to scrape up into so many obstructing little heaps, on our way down the slope.

"You see, ice and snow are two very different things," observed Willie Knowles, sagely. "It might do, if the snow were beaten very smooth, and could then be frozen hard and thick, but it isn't possible, with the snow in this state, I'm sure."

"Besides," put in Smedley, "the Russians have regular little sleighs, with steel runners like skates, to sit upon and slide down the hills with."

"Yes, I saw a picture in the *Illustrated*," said Johnnie Harris; "and jolly fun it looked, too. I do wish we *could* make one, somehow or other, if it were only a tiny little one."

"Oh, but *some* of them slide down on the bare ice, I'll bet," urged the Scamp. "Or at any rate, if *they* don't, or can't, I know *I* could—and would, too. I believe we *might* make one, if we tried."

"I don't," repeated Willie, and while he and the Scamp commenced a warm debate upon the knotty point, Freeman went outside, to make a miniature model of his scheme to prove who was in the right.

"No, it's no use," he said, despondingly, re-entering the hut, and throwing himself amongst the mass of feet that met in dense confusion in the centre of the diminutive room. "The snow is splendid for building, but it is not near hard or slick enough for such a purpose. I can make it beautifully smooth and slippery, just on the surface, by dint of a lot of patting and whacking, but as soon as you put your heel on it, it makes a dent directly, and if you lean the slightest weight upon it, it peels off at once, in so many lumps, all caked together anyhow."

The Scamp had vacated his post of honour some time ago; he rarely occupied the same seat long together, and now he was

sprawling ungracefully upon the floor near the doorway, contemplating mentally the failure of scheme No. 2, his eyes fixed vacantly upon the view outside, and his teeth industriously occupied in fraying out the ends of the ribbons to his Scotch cap.

"I know what!" he cried, excitedly, jumping up, all on the alert to rush off in the pursuit of his new project; for his eyes had suddenly lighted upon a likely suggestion for fresh sport of an engaging character. "We'll go and ride the donkey."

"There ain't no saddle," remarked Harry, more bluntly than grammatically.

"What's the odds? It'll be all the more lark, bare-backed!" exclaimed the Scamp, impetuously, not to be driven from his fixed intention by so trifling an obstacle as that.

So, with a cheer of encouragement to the rest to "come on and follow him," away he ran towards the paddock, where the rough-coated, stolid-looking donkey stood disconsolately rubbing his neck against the sheltered side of a tree, where the snow had not drifted into the crevices of the bark.

"There *is* a saddle in the coach-house, and Mrs. Hughes says we can have it," cried Johnnie Harris, running breathlessly into the group standing around the donkey, his face all aglow with the exertion of running so fast from the house, with his unexpected piece of information.

"What did you go bothering after that for?" asked the Scamp, rather vexed than pleased, at the prospect of having to ride in the ordinary fashion. "I'm sure it would be much more sprec without a saddle."

Poor old Neddy had a lively time of it during the next half-hour. He must have felt considerably surprised at the extraordinary treatment to which he was being subjected, but, with the proverbial meekness of his quiet race, he appeared to take the unaccustomed disturbance with as much demure indifference as if he had been tranquilly engaged in his usual employment of jogging calmly along, with little Mary on his back.

He slipped about a good deal, though, upon the steep paths, up and down and round which we led him, and the oftener he stumbled, the more the boys running along by his side shouted and jeered at the luckless rider upon his back.

Each fresh journey appeared to make the difficulty of preserving his balance greater, for each time the snow "balled" under his hoofs, and, worn hard with constant pressure, became more and more polished and slippery at every step.

At last it was my turn to have a ride. I did not feel very much inclined for the rough exercise, for though my secret grief had been temporarily chased from my memory, by the interest and amusement of building the snow-house, it had returned to my thoughts with redoubled force now, as I stood, with hands in pockets, looking on silently at the boys enjoying their novel diversion so thoroughly. For with nothing further to occupy your attention than the monotonous watching of other folks' pleasures, morbid thoughts stand a good chance of creeping into the mind, and are in fact only too apt to avail themselves of the opportunity.

"I don't care about it much, Will; I don't really, thanks," I suggested, mildly, as Willie Knowles, placing his hands under my arms, began to lift me on to the donkey's back. "Willie Robson can have my turn, if he likes."

"Nonsense, youngster!" replied Will Knowles, kindly. "Of course you'll have your turn, as much as any one else. Why shouldn't you? I should like to know."

There was no answering such an argument as that, so, without any further remonstrance, I allowed myself to be hoisted into position.

It was no use though. I did not enjoy myself one bit. Do what I would, I could not get back my spirits again.

As I jogged along, anything but comfortably, as you may imagine, the words that had been haunting me, sleeping and waking, off and on, ever since I had first heard them uttered, kept ringing through my head still:—"Hanging by a thread!"

"Hanging by a thread!" Why, even the very donkey seemed to be trotting to the tune of it!

So, repeating softly to myself, "I can't! I can't! with her life still 'hanging by a thread!'" I slipped quietly off at one side, at the imminent risk of landing upon my back, amongst the donkey's heels.

However, I managed to fall all right upon my feet, clinging fast all the while to the thick, stubby mane upon the ridge of the donkey's neck.

"Oh, you little duffer!" cried Rogers, running up, whilst several other boys crowded round. "You have come off just at the best part: it's fine fun trotting down this little pitch, I can tell you."

"I daresay it is; but I don't want to. You can have a go instead, if you like, Rogers," I answered, as amicably as I could.

"Oh no, no. *You* must keep it. Here, I shall put you on again. I believe the real truth is that you are in a funk, because it is so steep just here."

"Indeed I'm not!" I exclaimed, indignantly; for I didn't like to be considered a coward, any more than any one else does. So I offered no resistance to his proposal to give me a "bunt-up" into the saddle again.

"Oh, Rogers! you brute! That *is* too bad! Here, Bernard, I say! stop him! stop him! Don't let him trot! Tug at the reins,—hard! *hard!*!" shrieked Mat, racing after me, the moment I had started, evidently in a great state of alarm and concern about something.

But already Neddy was half way down the descent, and refused to be stopped by any paltry efforts of mine.

I didn't know then *why* Mat ran after me, but I felt a vague, indefinite kind of dread that something alarming had happened, and that Rogers was somehow mixed up with it.

Long afterwards, I was told that as soon as he had raised me into my seat, he had slyly inserted, underneath the saddle,

a pointed chip of frozen snow, which he had previously worked about in his hands, and squeezed and pressed so much that it was now as hard and as sharp as any jagged scrap of broken stone.

Naturally, at every trot, I was thrown forward in the saddle, only to fall back again with a heavy jerk upon the very spot beneath which Rogers had so cruelly and heartlessly inserted the irritating fragment of ice. It was not much wonder, therefore, that the donkey, goaded and maddened by the constant torment, as well as worried by the difficulty of keeping his feet, should be exasperated at length into a sudden attempt to throw his rider, and thus rid himself of the cause of at least a portion of his troubles.

Nothing could be easier to do : it was only necessary to pull up short, with a sudden jerk ; to thrust out both fore legs, stiff and straight, in front ; to stand stock-still ;—all without a moment's warning : and in another second I was flying head-long over his lowered head.

The next, with a deep, bleeding cut across my forehead, and a fragment of a broken border tile a few inches away, attesting to the force with which my head had come into contact with it, I was lying still and senseless upon the snow, at the side of the garden path.

Before long, I became dimly conscious of the presence of a group of familiar faces crowding round, looking strangely white and scared ; of patient Neddy, standing quietly by, as though he had had no share in the mischief, with his head hanging low and motionless as that of any wooden counterfeit sold in a children's toy-shop ; of the sound of many hushed voices talking rapidly and confusedly ; of Mrs. Hughes' well-known form, bending anxiously over my prostrate figure ; of a tingling sensation in my fingers, as though some one were chafing my numbed hands ; and of the unwonted taste of some stimulant or other being cautiously dropped between my lips.

Then I remembered no more, and all seemed thick, black darkness around me again.



CHAPTER XXIX.

"POPPING THE QUESTION."

ONE evening, not very long afterwards, I opened my eyes listlessly, and stared about, with a sort of vague wonder in my mind as to where I was.

Surely this was not my usual bedroom, and it could not be the middle of the night, for I had just been mechanically counting the strokes of the clock upon the stairs, as it deliberately struck—"One, Two, Three, Four!"

I had a sort of indefinite idea that something had happened, and that if only I could get it into my head again, I really knew all about it. But the more I tried to puzzle my brains to remember and recall past events, the more confused my thoughts appeared to grow.

So I gave up the attempt, and looked about me again.

The curtains were drawn close across the window, and a bright, cheery fire burnt upon the hearth.

In front of it sat Mrs. Hughes, knitting. No light burnt in the room, save that of the flickering flames, and indeed, for that matter, none was required; for once before, I had been amused by watching Mrs. Hughes, as she lay back in her rocking chair, with eyes fast closed, plying her needles as swiftly and surely as though she were watching them all the time, whilst little Mary, seated on a stool at her feet, had read aloud to her from some favourite interesting book of her own.

Presently, I called aloud to Mrs. Hughes.

How weak and feeble my voice sounded !

It startled even myself, and Mrs. Hughes positively jumped as she heard her name pronounced in such sepulchral tones.

Then she came hastening noiselessly to my side, and looked down eagerly into my face, scanning each feature anxiously.

"Did you call, Bernard? Do you feel a little better, to-night?" she asked, stooping down to kiss my forehead tenderly.

"Are you quite comfortable? or do you want anything, dearie?"

Instead of answering her questions, I asked one myself;—

"How long have I been ill, Mrs. Hughes?"

"Not long, dear," she replied evasively; "and we shall have you all right again, in a very few days now, I hope."

"Ah, but I want to know how long exactly."

"Well, let me see—ten days, about."

"Have I? What a long time! And haven't I ever 'woke till now?" I asked, in innocent wonder at the days having passed by without my being conscious of their flight. "I can't remember having heard any one talking, nor myself speaking, ever since the—the—tumble; but I must have really, of course. How funny! Isn't it, Mrs. Hughes?"

"You must not talk now, that's certain. You must try to swallow some of this nice, warm beef-tea, and then turn round and go to sleep again. Dr. Young will be coming to see you, presently, and he will be so pleased to find you better, that we must not do anything to tire you before his visit. Oh my! Bernie; what *is* the matter, child?"

For I had surprised her into this startled exclamation, by suddenly sitting bolt upright in bed, and staring into her face, with wide open eyes of eager interest.

'Dr. Young.' Ah! that name recalled a certain sorrow to my thoughts, that I had not remembered, until the incidental mention of one of the chief persons connected with the source of my grief, had brought it rushing through my head again with fresh bitterness.

But the effort was too much for my feeble body, in its present

weakened condition, and I fell back, exhausted, amongst the pillows again, faltering out, "Oh dear, dear! I quite forgot my own dear Miss Royce. Is she still—still—'hanging'?"

I repeated the last word under my breath, so perhaps Mrs. Hughes did not catch it. At any rate, though she had evidently gathered the drift of my inquiry, she did not seem amused or surprised at its odd form, but only answered very softly, though quickly, "Oh, Miss Royce is *much* better—quite out of danger now, in fact; so, if you don't take care, she may get quite well again before you do," and she smiled faintly.

Again I lay still for some while, with my eyes shut, thinking. I fancy Mrs. Hughes thought I had fulfilled her wish, and had gone to sleep, for she soon returned to her easy chair, and after lighting a little table lamp, which she carefully screened behind the curtain, she placed her feet upon the stool again, and took up a book to read, doing everything with such noiseless movements, that I concluded she was afraid of disturbing the slightest slumber.

"Mrs. Hughes?" I called presently.

She laid down her book at once, and came over to the chair at my bedside once more.

"You must not talk, my dear; you mustn't, indeed."

"Oh, but I'm wide awake, really."

"Well, you ought not to be, then!" she said, playfully. "Still, if you *won't* go to sleep, I shall not allow you to talk. Shall I read to you, or sing you a song?"

"No, thanks," I answered, ungratefully, "I want to talk."

"But you really must *not*, Bernard," repeated patient Mrs. Hughes. "It will excite you too much, yet; and Dr. Young would be so grieved and displeased, if he were to come in and find you restless or agitated."

"What day of the week is this, Mrs. Hughes?" I inquired, coolly ignoring her remarks, and bent upon opening a conversation, in spite of her commands to the contrary.

"It is Wednesday, to-day. There, hush now, do, there's a good boy! and go right off to sleep at once."

“Wednesday, is it? Well, then, I must have missed the Trial. Have I?”

“Yes, yes. But, really, Bernard, I shall go away and leave you, if you will persist in talking so.”

“Well then, if you do, I shall only get much *more* excited, lying here thinking and worrying, by myself, than I shall if you stay and talk to me,” I said, with a triumphant nod of the head, as though I had found an argument that would be a regular clincher in my favour.

“Oh, you sly little fellow!” laughed Mrs. Hughes. “Now if I *do* stop and talk to you, will you promise to be very quiet yourself?”

I wasn’t going to commit myself rashly, so I held my peace and said nothing. For a time, therefore, silence reigned between us. Then again I broke the stillness.

“So I have missed the Trial?” I repeated, musingly. “Oh! ain’t I just about glad! It’s worth falling off a hundred donkeys, just to get out of that!”

Mrs. Hughes looked very much chagrined at my obstinacy, though rather amused by my remark.

“I’ve been dreading that, more than I ever did anything in my life before,” I continued, reflectively. “Thinking about it day and night, until sometimes I couldn’t sleep a wink. Oh, I *am* so glad I’ve missed it, you can’t think! Only I would like to hear about it, though. Mrs. Hughes, have they come back yet?”

“Whom?”

“Why, the Scamp, and Mat, and Harry, of course.”

Mrs. Hughes looked very much as though she would have liked to have said “No,” but couldn’t, without telling an untruth. “Yes, they have come home,” she said. “But they have only been in an hour or so, yet,” she added, dissuasively, as though divining my next speech:—

“Oh, then won’t you let them come up and see me? I *would* so like to hear about all that happened, from their very own lips.”

"Oh dear, no!" exclaimed my nurse, aghast at such a suggestion; "certainly not! I could not dream of allowing such a thing, until you are much, much better."

"Oh, but, Mrs. Hughes, I'll half kill myself, with worrying about what it was all like, if you *don't* let them come up and tell me."

I was fast becoming a "deep" young rascal, but my obvious little ruse was, nevertheless, so far successful that Mrs. Hughes' determination at once began to waver. So, following up the advantage, I made another attack.

"If you won't let them *all* come, you might at least allow one," I pleaded. "Will you, please? Do, *do*, do,—there's a dear, kind Mrs. Hughes."

"Look here!" cried Mrs. Hughes, fairly exasperated by my irrepressible flow of language. "If I allow one of them to come and see you, just for five minutes, will you lie still and listen all the while, without talking?"

"Yes, yes," I assented, eagerly, without a moment's reflection.

"Which of the three shall it be, then?"

"Which? Oh, I don't exactly know! I'll choose Sam, I think—or Mat—or—or Harry," I said, wavering in my uncertainty which to select out of the trio.

Then, with a sudden burst of determination, as though fearful of relapsing into the old state of indecision and doubt, I exclaimed, "I'll have the Scamp, please: he is eldest, and I think he'll be best fun, too. He is such a queer fellow, isn't he?"

"Really, Bernard, I do think your tongue wags faster just now, when it is not wanted to, than it does when you are quite well and it does not matter so much!"

And then Mrs. Hughes bustled out of the room in search of the Scamp, whilst I lay in a feverish state of impatience, awaiting his arrival. She must have taken great pains to impress him with the necessity of toning down his usually exuberant spirits and loud voice, for he entered the room looking quite subdued, if not dejected, evidently expecting to find me very weak and ill indeed.

Well, well, perhaps, after all, Mrs. Hughes knew more about my own state of health than I did myself! That was a queer idea, certainly, but nevertheless, I was forced to confess that my limbs *did* ache and my whole frame seem *very* feeble, as I stretched out a welcoming hand to the Scamp,—in spite of the buoyant condition of my spirits just at this moment.

Boys are wonderfully shy of one another for the first few minutes, upon meeting again, after even a brief separation of a few days only, and even the brave, vivacious Scamp was no exception to the general rule.

Still, it would have been strange indeed, if that young gentleman had been unable to regain the use of that hard-worked member of his, the tongue, in a very short space of time compared to what many others of our companions would have required under similar circumstances. So, in two or three more minutes, he was fast enchaining my attention with a voluble description of the proceedings at the trial of "Springall Jack," at the recent Rockenham Winter Assizes.

"He has got in for it pretty stiffly, too, poor wretch! 'Three years' hard labour, and five years' police surveillance,'" and the Scamp made a wry face, as he slurred over the pronouncement of the last word of the verdict, which he had learnt by heart—"pat off," as he said.

"Weren't you *awfully* scared—?" I began; but Mrs. Hughes held up a warning finger, and I stopped short.

"'Scared'? What about? Of the Judge, and the barristers, and all those? Not a bit! Mat and Harry were—or said they were—but I just said to myself, 'Sam Camp, you know they can't do anything to *you*, unless you tell lies, and you aren't likely to do that, if those barristers don't *make* you without your meaning to; they are not trying *you*, so why should *you* be afraid? You didn't mind the old gentlemen on the magistrates' bench at Brookford; so why fear the Judge here? for after all, he is only an ordinary gentleman—if a very clever and wise one—and a very kind, good sort of a fellow, too, I'll warrant, so

you don't mean to say you are going to be scared by the mere sight of a big, curly, white wig and gorgeous scarlet robes, are you? That would be *too* silly!

"But the Judge was down upon me, once, like anything, because, when one of the barristers had been badgering me past bearing, I told him that—though he might make me *say* I wasn't sure whether the Lanky Man was really 'Springall Jack' or not—I should always *mean* what I had said first, and stuck to now,—that I was quite *positive* that he *was* the man, and that it couldn't possibly be any one else, and that Hero quite agreed with me, and shared the same opinion very decidedly.

"The barrister was furious, and the Judge shook his head, when I laughed, and told me I must remember where I was, and the respect due to the representatives of the Law; that it was no laughing matter, for any one concerned—particularly for the prisoner at the bar; and that he could not have the counsel 'cheeked'—that's what he *meant*—in that undignified manner.

"But, really, those barristers are just simply awful! They *will* make you say black is white, and then stick to it that because, in your worry and confusion, you unintentionally said so, you *really mean* it, or that, at any rate, your previous evidence as to the colour cannot be depended upon any longer, since you have been detected in so manifest a contradiction of your own statements!"

The Scamp delivered this closing speech with much animated emphasis. Finally, however, he became so warmed up and excited by his theme, that, in spite of Mrs. Hughes' oft-repeated cautions, his wild spirits and noisy mode of expression proved too much for my nerves, and Mrs. Hughes, growing alarmed, bid him rise, and take his departure forthwith.

"There, Sam! that must do for the present. You have already talked to Bernard more than is good for him, I fear."

"I always think it is such a pity, Sam," she continued, smiling, "that you never had the good fortune to have any sisters. They would have exercised just that softening influence

over you which is needed to convert you into a well-mannered, refined, little gentleman ; for I am afraid we can scarcely call you that yet, can we ? "

" ' Sisters ' ? " echoed the Scamp, scornfully, " I'm jolly glad I haven't got any ! I hate girls !—sisters, that is. Girls that are not sisters are different, of course," he added, with a saucy leer, as he made for the door.

" Oh, fie ! fie ! " exclaimed Mrs. Hughes, laughing, in spite of her affecting to be shocked, edging him on his way as she spoke.

" Well," remarked the Scamp, willing to compromise affairs a trifle, " perhaps I wouldn't mind just *one* ; she could make the sails for my boats, you know,—they aren't much use for any thing else, that *I* see."

Little Mary used very often to sit in the room to keep me company, when her mother was absent, as well as to minister to all my numerous wants.

She rather liked giving me my frequent doses of homeopathic medicines, strictly according to the directions pasted upon the tumbler in which it was contained, and I am sure I never took physic with more regularity, or with less repugnance, than I did from her hands. Very often, too, she would read aloud to me, or relate interesting anecdotes from the story-books which she had been recently reading.

One morning, when I awoke, I saw her seated upon her accustomed stool on the hearthrug, busily engaged in perusing the contents of a rather crumpled sheet of note paper. Her brow was puckered, and her lips set, with the absorbed air of one who is trying vainly to decipher the meaning of certain mysterious words. For some time I watched her in silence, noticing, indeed, her occupation, but not troubling myself particularly to wonder what it could be. I had, in fact, been dreaming very peacefully and pleasantly,—just as I loved to " dream the happy hours away." So interesting and enjoyable had my slumbering fancies proved, that it was with quite a pang that I opened my eyes upon the garish daylight, and found all my

fair visions only the result of a creative imagination. Presently, following up my own train of thought, without reflecting that possibly my companion might require gradually leading up to the same point, before properly comprehending my views, I said bluntly, without any preparatory remark, "Mary, wouldn't it be very nice and jolly if you and I were *always* to live together? You can't think how good it is to wake up and see you sitting there, so patient, and kind, and—and—pretty!"

Instead of making any reply, Mary burst out laughing, and then, as though speaking to herself rather than to me, she said, "Why, of course, that's what *he* means, too! How silly of me not to be able to guess! But just fancy my having *two* offers on the same day!"

"'Offers'!" thought I to myself, "it sounds quite different, when it's put like that,—quite formal and imposing, in fact!" But aloud I merely repeated slowly, "Two—offers! Whoever else has—? What do you mean?—what's that you have there?" I stammered out, presently, my curiosity and—shall I say it?—jealousy getting the better of my manners.

"You can see it for yourself, if you like," returned Mary, not in the least offended by my inquisitiveness. "I have been puzzling my brains for the last half-hour, trying to guess *what*—ever he could mean by that odd, blank space. Now, of course, it's plain enough."

So saying, she tossed me the paper, over which she had been poring, and this is what I read:—

"Deer Mayry

"I right these fu lines jest to ask wether you will * * * * * me.

"I shall feel so prow and Pappy if you will and if you wont please to shake your hed at me at diner time.

"I remane

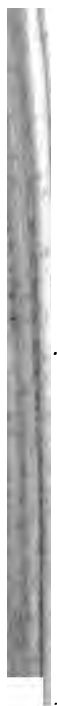
"Your affectnate Frend

"Samuel Camp.

"P.S. I didnt like two ask you strate out that's why I've
ritten. S. C."



"I LIKE SAM VERY WELL, BUT I LIKE YOU BETTER."



The Scamp was notorious for his spelling, as this note would at once testify, and his curious mistake as to his hopes of felicity, was only another proof of what a laboured production a letter always was, under his hands.

"Isn't it funny of him?" said Mary, stooping down to pick up the letter, which I had flung back towards her.

"Are you going to have him?" I inquired, turning my face over upon the pillow, and trying to prevent my voice from showing any trace of interest or impatience in its tones.

For you must not think that because *you* have never felt them, the angel of Love and the demon of Jealousy cannot enter into the heart of a seven-year-old child. Why, I have heard a lady solemnly declare that she never loved so passionately as she did at the early age of *four*! Not that I was "over head and ears" with Mary. I had only made her a premature proposal, in indirect terms, just as scores of little boys have done before me, and will do again to the end of all time, to the little girls for whom they may entertain a special affection.

And, as a rule, the fair favourites are only too ready to return the sentiment, and to enter into the spirit of the thing, with even more energy and enthusiasm than the originator himself can boast; for they must needs think it necessary to do everything very correctly and deliberately, anxious to imitate their superiors in age and wisdom, in all those little forms and ceremonies with which the romance and novelty of a first confession of attachment is usually surrounded.

"Are you going to have *him*, or *me*?" I repeated, crossly, for Mary had been rescanning Sam's note, and had not, apparently, noticed my previous observation.

"No, of course not; I shall have *you*," she returned, with that open candour which could only possibly exist between two child-lovers. "I like Sam very well, but I like you better," she added naively, blushing a little.

"And the Scamp said only the other day that he hated girls! That's just like him, to say one thing one day, and do just the

opposite the next!" I cried, still half inclined to be jealous of my would-be rival.

"I'll always be your nurse, and see to your having your medicine and beef-tea properly," said Mary, contemplatively.

"But I shan't be ill *always*, you know. And as soon as ever I get well, I intend to go down into the village and buy you a ring."

"Look here!" cried Mary, jumping up, excitedly. "I've got a bead one here that will do beautifully,—I made it myself. I'll take it off this finger, and then *you* can put it on the proper one. No one will know, then, but ourselves. I shan't tell Ma even, so mind you don't either—because she *might* think it silly for us to be engaged so young."

"All right!" I answered, blithely, as I slipped the home-made ring upon her finger. "Only I wish the Scamp didn't like you, too. He's such a jolly, lively fellow; he can do all sorts of things that *I* can't. I can't think why you didn't have *him*;" and I spoke with the peevish air of one who delights in raising imaginary grievances, for the sole purpose of hearing them treated as so many fanciful bogies, and contemptuously knocked down again.

"There! There goes the dinner-bell!" I cried, after a pause. "Now you will have to go down and shake your head at the Scamp, won't you? But I do wish he hadn't asked you: girls are such *false* things,—you are just as likely as not to marry *him*—perhaps all the more so for having promised *me*!"

"Oh, you jealous, spiteful, old thing!" cried Mary, laughing, as she ran out of the room. "I wonder you haven't a better opinion of your young lady!"





CHAPTER XXX.

REGGIE AND POLLIE.

THE days dragged wearily on.

Except for my newly-found pleasure in the companionship of my little sweetheart, some of the days would have seemed almost intolerably long and monotonous.

"Mrs. Hughes," I said, eagerly, when she was sitting alone with me, one day, just as it was growing dusk, "won't you let some of the boys come and stay with me for a bit? I know you, and little Mary, and Eliza, are very kind to me, and it sounds dreadfully ungrateful to say so,—but I *do* want to see some of the fellows again. Just a few of my special 'chums,' Mrs. Hughes,—just Willie Knowles, and Mat, and Harry, and—and—the Scamp, I think—yes, the Scamp ;—and—and—Rogers, too."

"'Rogers'?" repeated Mrs. Hughes, wishing, I fancied, to frame an excuse for evading a direct refusal to the other part of my question. "Rogers is not here now, you know."

"Isn't he?"

"Oh dear, no. He was sent off home, the very next day after your accident. Of course, though, you would not be likely to know,—I forgot that."

But—very kindly and wisely—Mrs. Hughes refrained from mentioning the share that Rogers had had in bringing about the catastrophe which had resulted in my illness: that was a point which I did not learn until long afterwards.

"Sent off home—without saying good-bye to me? Oh dear, dear. Then I shan't be able to 'make up' with him, now. And I shall never become a 'Child of God,' for—try how I may—it doesn't seem as though I could ever be a peacemaker,—not even the least little bit of one! I have squabbled, and made other people quarrel, and have got fellows into 'rows,' ever since I first came to school; and yet I haven't ever stopped one fight, or made two enemies friends again, or anything. And now I have lost my last chance."

"What do you mean, child? Whatever funny notion have you got into your head now?"

Thus invited, I willingly poured into Mrs. Hughes' sympathizing ear the story of my heart's desire.

Very artlessly and quietly did I unburden my mind to her, relating the whole history of my wonderful dream upon the lawn, and telling her, with all a child's ardent sincerity, of the yearning that it had created in my heart to be numbered with that happy band of God's little ones, to enter whose ranks it was essential to become—in thought and deed—a veritable peacemaker.

Mrs. Hughes listened very attentively to my short narrative, but did not make any remark until I had finished speaking.

Then she said, very gravely and seriously, "Do you know what I think is the reason of your failure so far? It is this. You have been fancying all the time that it was a rank to which you could attain in your own strength,—a prize which you could *earn*, as it were, if you strived hard enough. Instead of this, you should have asked God to fill your heart with that love and peace without which no one can ever hope to become a peacemaker."

"That is exactly what Miss Royce says," I interrupted.

"So now," continued Mrs. Hughes, "perhaps God means to teach how He can—of His own free will—make you 'more than conqueror,'—even when you least expect it, and have, possibly, given up all hope of ever succeeding in your cherished

ambition. And that, too, without a single struggle or effort on your part."

"I never thought of it like that, before," I said, rather despondingly. "But I don't see how God *can* make *me* a peace-maker, now,"—I said it, as I felt it, in utter reverence—"for Rogers, you say, has gone, and all the other boys leave to-morrow, don't they?"

After a few moments' reflection, Mrs. Hughes replied,—

"God grants us our hearts' desires in such different ways to what we had ever anticipated, sometimes."

Then there was silence between us again.

What secret magic is it that occasionally inspires two people's minds with kindred thoughts,—even when no word has passed to suggest the slightest vein of sympathy?

Be that as it may, Mrs. Hughes started, when I at length broke the silence by exclaiming with some gusto,—

"I do wish Father would come to see me; I can't think why he stays away."

"Strange, is it not? I was just thinking about him, too,—just that very moment," and Mrs. Hughes laughed gently.

"It is so dull and miserable without Father," I broke out again, not heeding my companion's remark. "And it will be worse when all the boys are gone. And I don't know that I've got any relatives in all the world besides him—except an Aunt Mary, and I don't know her. So that it is worse for me than for most little boys when they are ill, isn't it? Oh dear, dear! I can't imagine why he doesn't come."

Mrs. Hughes seemed uneasy. She rose from her arm-chair, and stood awhile on the hearth-rug, her eyes fixed vacantly upon the glowing mass of burning fuel. Then she turned, and with her eyes still staring blankly before her, walked slowly across to my bedside, her hands clasped behind her back, and her whole attitude denoting deep thought.

"Shall I tell you a story, Bernie?" she asked, gravely and deliberately, as though she had arrived at some fixed determina-

tion, seating herself as she spoke in the chair which stood by the bed's head.

"Oh yes, please do," I cried, my eyes kindling with sudden interest, and my large stock of curiosity fully aroused.

"Once upon a time, then—"

"Oh, that's how fairy tales begin," I interrupted, disappointed. "I shan't like that story. I don't care for fairy tales."

"No. It is not a fairy tale," replied Mrs. Hughes. "It is a real, true story."

"All right, then," I said, satisfied. "Go on, please."

"Well, once upon a time—not so very, very long ago—there lived, with an elderly maiden aunt of theirs, a little boy and girl—orphans. The care and attention which this good lady bestowed upon her little kinsfolk was not, I am afraid, repaid by them with that amount of gratitude and affection which we are wont to expect from those for whom we expend our patience and our energy.

"So little, in fact, did the children's tastes and opinions correspond with those of their zealous but austere relative, that scarcely a day passed without some skirmish taking place between the stern aunt and her high-spirited little nephew, who outraged her dignity, and sorely tried her patience, in a thousand worrying ways.

"In this course of resistance to the vexing rules and restraints placed upon them, the boy was ably seconded by his admiring little sister, whose unbounded faith in the prowess of her 'big brother'—as she fondly styled him—led her to imitate his conduct and obey his directions, with a fervour and implicitness which frequently resulted in serious consequences to herself.

"One day, a more flagrant breach than usual of the regulations laid down for their proper control occurred. As a direct consequence of this insurrection, a severer punishment was meted out than had ever been administered in the interest of their well-being before.

"But the chastisement was endured by both the hardened little culprits with the same sullen indifference as ever.

"As soon, however, as the two children—still smarting under a resentful sense of tyranny and wrong—had been liberated from their respective places of confinement, they set off together at once for that old rustic arbour at the foot of the garden, which was always their refuge in all times of sorest distress, as well as their play-place and store-house for treasures and curiosities in more peaceable seasons.

"While they felt that the eyes of their guardian were still upon them, watching their stately progress down the garden path, they walked demurely enough, side by side, their heads erect and shoulders set well back,—knowing full well that should they dare either to slouch, or to run, before those observant, critical eyes, they would be ruthlessly summoned back, and ordered to march again down the garden path, 'as though they were well-brought-up little gentlefolk, and not like good-for-nothing gutter-waifs, or ill-trained school-children.'

"But as soon as the corner was fairly turned, and they knew that they were screened from detection, away they both scampered, nor paused until the quaint old summer-house was gained.

"Once reached, it was not long before the boy, with a dexterity gained by long practice, had hoisted his sister on to the high seat by the table, from which her short, chubby legs dangled with a painful appearance of discomfort and insecurity.

"Then, edging himself into position exactly opposite her, they leaned their elbows on the table, and rested their chins upon their hands, staring drearily into each other's sympathetic faces. "'Pollie,' said the little boy, 'if it weren't for you, I'd run away; that I would!'

"'Oh! Reggie, Reggie,—don't—don't—don't!' was all that the little girl in her distress could blurt out. For the eyes that had been dry and defiant all day, in spite of all that could be said or done to make that rebellious little heart tender and re-

morseful, began to fill directly now, at the bare prospect of so terrible a gap in her future life.

" 'I would !' reiterated the boy, stoutly.

" 'Oh! oh! oh! what will become of me?' cried his little sister, fairly sobbing at this fresh proof of her brother's determination.

" 'Be quiet, Pollie, do. Now, didn't I say, "if it weren't for you"? And isn't that the same as saying that I shan't go, whilst things are as they are? So you needn't cry out before you're hurt; that's just like a girl!'

"It did not occur to Pollie to suggest that—being of the gentler sex—her actions were likely to be of such a character: the taunt was too familiar, and the little girl too submissive to her brother's will, for that. So, pulling out her pocket-handkerchief, she slowly rubbed her eyes, doing her best to calm her ruffled feelings in obedience to her lord's command.

" 'Reggie,' she said, by-and-by, 'what *should* I do without you?'

" 'Nothing!' observed Master Reginald, briefly.

" 'Oh, but I mean if Aunt—horrid thing!—were to send either of us to school, as she threatened to-day.'

" 'No chance of that,' replied the wise little fellow; 'if she won't let us see or know any children here, she is not likely to send us where there are a whole lot of objectionable creatures like ourselves. I wish she would!'

" 'Oh, Reggie! I think *I* would *die*, if she did!'

" 'No, you wouldn't. 'Tisn't so easy!'

" 'Well, any way, I'd *try*. I wouldn't *like* to live,—away from you.'

"Reggie was somewhat moved at the earnest tones in which this little speech was uttered, and condescended to reply that he, too, *might* find life a trifle dull, if he were deprived of the companionship of the only little fellow-creature he had ever known and loved.

" 'Reggie,' broke out the little girl, again, after a brief period of reflection, 'we'll live together always, won't we?'

" 'Always.'

" 'For ever and ever :—just you and I ?'

" 'For ever and ever amen.'

" 'Oh, won't it be splendid ! And when Aunt Rachel is dead, and we can do just what we please,—oh, it will be good !'

" 'And we won't ever marry, will we ?' said Reggie, beginning to grow interested.

" 'Never ! We will live together till we're ever so old—till we're twenty, maybe,' said little Pollie, displaying a shocking ignorance as to the relative value of numbers.

" 'Twenty !' laughed Reggie, scornfully. 'A hundred you mean, more likely !'

" 'Then you'll promise ?' urged his wee sister, disregarding the interruption.

" 'Promise what ?'

" 'That you won't ever marry, and will always live with me.'

" 'Done ! But it will be you who will break the promise first, if either of us do.'

" 'I shan't !'

" 'You will.'

" 'I won't.'

" 'You will I tell you. Girls always do.'

" There was no gainsaying the usual sneer, illogical though the argument might be.

" When Reggie spoke like that, Pollie always gave way at once.

" So she said nothing, but sat quietly contemplating the minute pricks upon her forefinger, caused by the unskilful use of her needle when wrestling with the unwieldy piece of work which she had been set to perform during her hours of recent punishment. Apparently the study suggested a different train of thought, for presently she cried out, with more earnestness than elegance, 'I *hate* her ! I wish she'd *die*. Then we'd be happy.'

" What was that ?

" What could have made Reggie start with such a queer stifled cry of alarm ?

"Surely—wild as were the words—he was too familiar with the expression of such a sentiment—he had indulged in similar language himself, for that matter—for any horror at his sister's outspoken opinion to have blanched his cheeks to such an ashy paleness as that which suddenly overspread them.

"With the sickening apprehension of a guilty conscience, the little girl divined the horrible situation in an instant; for, though her back was turned to the little window with its tiny panes of brilliantly-coloured glass, she knew instinctively what it was that had met her brother's horrified sight.

"The next moment, a voice sounded harshly in her ears:—

"'I have heard all you said,—you bad, wicked, good-for-nothing little hussy.'

"Pollie heard no more; for, with a resounding thwack, her aunt's heavy hand made short work of the little girl's unsteady balance, knocking her off her perch to roll half-stunned and senseless upon the floor.

"But the cruel blow that knocked his sister down, fetched Reggie's 'monkey' up, and without a moment's reflection as to the enormity of the crime which he was about to commit, he slid off his seat, and struck his aunt with all the strength and power at his command. Two minutes after, the enraged lady was stalking at a rapid pace toward the house, dragging behind her, one in either hand, two small, rebellious children, with faces flushed as red as those of any enraged, but vanquished, furies.

"Within a week from that date, Reggie and Pollie were mourning the loss of each other's company, at the respective schools which had been honoured by the approval and selection of that rigid disciplinarian—Aunt Rachel."

Mrs. Hughes stopped, and looked at me narrowly, to see—I supposed—whether I were sufficiently interested in her story to wish to hear more.

"Well," she asked, "shall I—?"

"Oh, yes. Please do go on," I cried, anticipating her remark. "*Did* she die?—the cross old aunt, I mean."

"You will hear.

"Years passed, but not once in all those many long months did little Pollie return to the old home, or see anything of her brother Reggie. True, she heard from him sometimes, and always replied at once to his welcome letters. So speedily, in fact, did she forward her answers, that he was scarcely ever out of her debt for more than a post at a time!

"But one day, when Pollie was almost 'grown-up'—or quite so in the estimation of most of her schoolfellows, and in her own opinion, too—the lady-principal called her aside into her room.

"Telling her to prepare for bad news, she gave her an opened letter to read.

"The paper was edged with a deep border of black, and, for a moment, Pollie's hand trembled, as a sudden dread filled her heart.

"But the next instant, she saw that it was in Reggie's handwriting—grown bold and firm, now—and, with a quick revulsion of feeling, she read on.

"It was with a half-defined feeling of shame that she felt her heart jump and her temples throb, as her eyes drank in the news—good,—and bad, so-called—together, which all seemed to bring back joy into her young heart again, instead of sorrow and grief, as part of it, at any rate, should have done.

"Her aunt had died suddenly; and Reggie—who had been forgiven, and who had been living in the old home for some months past, now—had sent to summon his sister home to keep house for him.

"She went. And once more the good old times—strangely altered, nevertheless, but better than ever, now—came back again, and once more she *lived*.

"Ah! how good to be home again, and living with Reggie:—and alone, too, just as they had planned. That was better than all. After all, what love was there like a brother's love?

"So the days passed swiftly, and Reggie and Pollie—no

longer boy and girl, but man and woman, now—still kept the same loving, clinging faith enshrined within each other's heart.

"Reggie was occupied in business all the day, but Pollie must not be allowed to suffer, on that account, for want of company and amusement.

"So, as she would not hear of any plan for admitting another human being beneath their roof, who might mar the perfect harmony of their peaceful home-life, she must be surrounded with companions of a different nature. And what so companionable, next to the human species, as a noble, high-spirited horse, or an intelligent dog?

"One day, Pollie went out alone for a morning canter, as usual, across the glorious Downs.

"It was May-day; and just as she had traversed the outskirts of the town, and was upon the margin of the vast ocean of green sward, stretching far away towards the horizon, she encountered a long procession of 'Odd Fellows,' marching to the trysting-place of the various companies of their order in the large, open Market-square.

"As usual, the procession was gay with a profusion of coloured scarves and 'favours,' and in the wind floated numberless flags and banners of every hue and form.

"In addition to the crashing music of two bands—only far enough apart to render the mingling of their discordant sounds more confounding than ever—the procession was accompanied by a numerous train of hangers-on,—ardent and enthusiastic admirers from the native villages of most of the members,—who were bent upon enjoying to the full the excitement of a day in town. As an agreeable commencement to the fun, these were indulging in discordant vocal renderings of the tunes played by the bands,—interspersed with sundry specimens of 'horse-play,' of the roughest and most noisy description.

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"But as she passed the man who carried the big drum, the

foolish young fellow, seeing how the horse reared and pranced, and considering his fright as rather a good joke than otherwise, beat the drum with an increased energy and vigour, which would have seemed impossible to those who had heard the noise which his previous efforts had already abstracted from the tight-strained vellum.

"Seizing the bit between his teeth, the terrified animal reared high in the air, plunged forward headlong again—and bolted.

"Through the crowd of 'rowdies' and urchins it tore, scattering them in all directions, like chaff before a whirlwind.

"After a desperate struggle to regain her control over the animal, Pollie knew that he had got his head, and that she was conquered. Then she spent all her strength in keeping firmly in her seat, trusting that ere long her steed would become exhausted with his run, and she, once more, should gain the mastery.

"And the Downs were vast—illimitable,—almost,—even to a runaway horse.

"Except on one side—and oh, horror!—the horse had swerved, and in his madness was rushing headlong to the steep, high precipices overhanging the river.

"She caught the reins with a firmer grasp. Even now, she did not lose her presence of mind. She knew that all depended upon herself, and if she were not equal to the impending emergency—what then?

"A man—one of her brother's workmen—had witnessed the whole incident, and had rushed off, full tear, to tell his master what was passing. But already to the excited members of the procession, which had broken up in confusion, she was little more than a speck in the distance: and even the foremost of those who were rushing after her could not expect to reach the spot where she now was, under at least ten minutes or a quarter of an hour.

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"Yes: some one who was walking towards the town along

the edge of the cliffs, had suddenly caught sight of the mad horsewoman, who was rushing so heedlessly and ignorantly into inevitable danger, if not to certain death ; and had thrown up his arms wildly, with a loud shout of warning and alarm.

"Ah ! but it was the horse that was mad, and the horse-woman powerless.

"And the man was a *cripple* !

"Never mind ! A helpless woman being hurried to an awful destruction. What should prevent even a poor, weak cripple from doing his utmost to avert so terrible a doom ?

"The horse was coming straight towards him.

"That was a mercy ! For a cripple could not run far, even though he might be able to hobble a good many miles in the course of a morning, if he could travel at his own pace.

"Well, at any rate, he must meet it as far from the edge as possible.

"So, half jumping, half limping, he hastened forward.

"Ha ! The lady was leaning backward, now, as though she were going to fall off.

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"Pollie knew nothing more, until she found herself lying in her own comfortable bed at home.

"She was not seriously injured, only bruised and shaken a little. But what of her strange preserver, who had saved her from her doom ?

"Reginald reassured her. He was an artist, without friends,

without money, who had come down to sketch some of this same grand rock scenery upon the river.

"He had been terribly cut about and injured ; so Reginald had ordered him to be brought to his own house here, where he could have the best care and attention that was to be had for love or money.

"And so events proved.

"Before long, Pollie had sufficiently recovered to undertake the duty of nursing the brave man to whom she owed—perhaps her very life.

"Gratitude often begets affection. So it was little wonder that when the artist was well enough to leave the shelter of the roof under which he had been so hospitably treated, he should have wanted to rob the little household of all that was dearest and best to its young owner.

"For he had had the audacity to suggest that Pollie should come away with him, and Pollie, in spite of her promise to Reggie, years ago,—and repeated so often since—consented.

"Reginald upbraided her at first, and laughed the matter off as a silly, girlish freak,—taunted her with her broken vow,—but all to no purpose.

"Then, seeing her fixed determination, he grew seriously angry, told her how the romance,—if there were any—of such a union would soon wear off,—with a penniless, crippled husband, whose handsome face would not support a wife, unaided by any other members of his body. And those hands of his—which used to serve him so well—are maimed and useless, now.

"Upon which, Pollie whimpered, but remained firm. If the hands be maimed and helpless, is it not thanks to her ?

"Then Reginald, being in a towering passion at having his will thwarted for the first time by his gentle, but obstinate, sister, upbraided her warmly for her perfidy in thus leaving him—him whom she had loved and honoured and obeyed from very babyhood.

"And all for a stranger—a man of whom she knew absolutely nothing !

"But, being, nevertheless, an upright man, and very honourable, he adds that she shall have her portion of the property, which is more or less in his hands, and shall be free to do as she pleases.

"Yet if she choose the artist, she must lose her brother, for he will not have her divided affections,—and shared by such a man, too !

"Pollie resented this sneer, and for the first time in her life, fired up at her brother.

"And so, on the morrow, she passed out at the great oaken gates, with a sorrowful, heavy heart—expecting never to see the dear old home again—went out with the brave, handsome cripple who had saved her life, and left behind the beloved, relentless brother, who would not *share* her heart, if he could not claim the whole.

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And now, as she related the incident of the runaway horse, a dim, confused sense of familiarity awoke within my memory.

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“Why, that’s my father and his sister! He has often told me about her horse running away—and I’ve seen the very spot where she fell. But he never told me about the poor, brave, crippled gentleman. How *do* you know all about it?”

I was scarcely prepared for Mrs. Hughes' strange mode of answering my eager question: for, instead of replying, she suddenly threw her arms around my neck, and kissed me impulsively on either cheek.

As her face touched mine, I could feel that her cheeks were moist with silent tears.

"Shall I tell you a great secret?" she whispered in my ear.

"Oh yes, do, please," I answered, half suspecting the coming revelation.

"Well,—I was that little girl,—so I am your Aunt Mary. Are you not glad? Won't it feel pleasanter now, to know that your own Aunt—Father's only sister—is watching over and caring for you? And little Mary is your first-cousin; isn't that nice?"

"Little Mary my first-cousin?" I echoed, dreamily. "Yes, that *would* be nice—only:—can first cousins marry, Mrs. Hughes?"

"'Marry'?" repeated Mrs. Hughes, in a tone of surprise; "'marry'?" Well, I believe they *can*—just because the law-makers thought they would never wish to!—but you don't want to marry Mary, I suppose, do you?"

Ah! with my usual thoughtlessness, I had 'let the cat out of the bag,' without in the least intending it.

So I kept silence, and Mrs. Hughes, doubtless thinking the idea too absurd to have any foundation in fact, did not press for an explanation of my unlucky speech.

"Then that's the reason that Father wouldn't speak to you that day," I said, presently, reverting to the topic which was still keeping my mind in such a turmoil of excitement, partly with the intention of giving a turn to the conversation. "I knew you must have had a regular, downright, thundering big quarrel, because he was so angry with me for asking him about it."

"Did he tell you that we had had a quarrel, then?"

"No; he didn't actually *say* so," I answered with truthful

precision ; " but he wouldn't say that you had *not*,—so I knew that you *had* ! "

" And what made him vexed with you, dear ? "

" Oh, different things. Partly, because I told him that if he didn't make it up with you, he would never become a ' Child of God,'—because of what that text says, you know. "

The tea-bell rang just then, and Mrs. Hughes rose, saying, " I must go down, my dear, now. I will send *Cousin* Mary up with your tea. Do you think you could eat an egg, to-night ? "

" Oh, yes,—half a dozen ! " I replied, laughing. " I feel ever so well, this evening. And may Mary stay and have tea with me, please ? "

" If you like, " nodded Mrs. Hughes, kindly.

" And—Mrs. Hughes ! " I called after her, just as she had passed out at the door.

She stepped back, and looking over her shoulder, said smilingly, " You must learn to call me by my proper title now. Well, what is it ? "

" I may sit up again to-night, mayn't I ? And you will let some of the boys come and see me, won't you ? Because it is the last night, you know, and I *must* say ' Good-bye ' to all my special ' chums,' at the very least, mustn't I ? "

" We shall see, we shall see ! " said Mrs. Hughes, evasively, and passed out.

Little Mary was not long before she made her appearance, carrying a little tray, upon which were spread tea and eatables for two. Very shortly she had seated herself before the fire, and was doing ample justice to the tempting fare which she had provided for our dainty appetites, whilst I sat, propped up with bolster and pillows, sturdily munching my hot buttered toast, and watching her every movement, with an undefined dread in my mind lest a fresh source of difficulty and distrust had suddenly arisen in the pathway of my little love and me.

Neither of us had spoken for a long while. I still stared hard at Mary, and she still pensively gazed into the fire.

The story of little Reggie and Pollie, in the summer-house, was haunting my mind yet.

"Mary!" I ejaculated, suddenly.

Mary started from her reverie, and turned round inquiringly.

"You and I are first-cousins!"

It was a startling statement, briefly and abruptly put—or so I thought: but Mary did not seem greatly moved thereby, and only said, simply, "Are we? Who says so?"

"Mrs. Hughes," I said, somewhat tartly.

"Humph! That's funny! I wonder she never told *me*."

"'Funny'?" I echoed, nettled at her indifference, "*I* don't call it 'funny': I call it downright horrid!"

"Why?"

How aggravatingly cool she was!

"'Why?'—Because we can't marry now," I replied, in my exasperation overstating the facts of the case. "Don't you call that something worse than 'funny'?"

"I don't see why we shouldn't, if we wish to."

"'If!'" I repeated, with a sneer. "That's just it! Now, when you know a fellow is only your first-cousin, you don't want to!"

"I don't see what difference that makes."

"Well,—it *needn't*," I said, relenting a little. "Maybe we *could* be married—though it is not very usual, perhaps. But you'll get to think more about the Scamp, now, and then you'll break your promise."

"I shan't!"

"You will: girls always do," I urged, half-unconsciously quoting the very words which Reggie had used in Mrs. Hughes' story.

Happily, Mrs. Hughes' entrance put a sudden stop to any further discussion on the subject.

"Well, may I sit up by the fire for a bit?" I asked, eagerly.

"I have thought of another plan for you," replied she;—"if *only I* felt sure that you were strong enough to stand it."

"Oh, yes, yes; I am plenty strong enough."

"But you don't know what it is, yet!"

"I know it is something nice," I replied, naïvely.

"Being 'breaking-up night,' the boys are going to dance Sir Roger de Coverley, presently, down in the hall, and I thought, perhaps—ah! but you must not excite yourself like that already, child, or I shan't let you do it. Get back into bed again, and pull the clothes right up round your neck. Well, I thought you might be carried down, chair and all, so that you might see some of the fun—just for a short time, you know."

I drew a long, deep breath.

"Oh, thank you, Aunt Mary. Oh, that will be good!" I cried, excitedly.

At length I was dressed and reclining amongst many pillows in the big arm-chair.

Then Eliza, and Willie Knowles, and the Scamp had all to be summoned, to lend willing hands to the labour of carrying me and my chair, bodily, along the passage and down the staircase. The Scamp seemed vastly diverted by the performance. I could not see the grimaces which I felt sure he was making, for Mrs. Hughes had thrown a large woollen shawl right over me, head and all, but I could hear his chuckling laugh following every fresh lurch of their ponderous and unwieldy load.

It was a joyous sight, indeed, to see my old companions, when at last I was safely deposited beside a roaring fire, and the stifling shawl had been removed.

But Mrs. Hughes would not allow them to crowd around me, and as I was not to stay here long, the order was immediately given for every one to fall into ranks, and the dancing began. Mrs. Hughes herself presided at the piano, which had been dragged for the occasion from its recess in the drawing-room; so there were only Miss Baxter and little Mary as lady-partners for the whole host of gentlemen.

But we were used to that sort of thing, so it did not take long for the boys to sort themselves into couples.

Willie Knowles and Miss Baxter were at the bottom of the two lines, right in front of me.

But the top couple were out of sight behind my chair, and I could not turn to see who they might be.

Well, there was the music striking up: so I should soon know.

Willie stepped forward with his hand extended to take that of the "first lady," and tripping to meet him, I soon saw little Mary.

So she was at the other end. Then who could be her partner?

My mind misgave me.

It was Miss Baxter's turn to advance now, and Mary's partner's place to meet her.

There he was. Yes,—just as I thought—the Scamp! And how pleased and radiant his bonny, rosy face looked, too, in spite of its freckles! So different to my pale face and frail body! It was no wonder that Mary should like him so.

Well, at any rate, there was some consolation in reflecting that if she were his partner, the dance necessitated his going through its varied evolutions with another person's lady.

He must have overlooked that phase of the performance.

But no. After all, events proved that, as usual, the Scamp had all his wits about him; for they were going to dance the "corkscrew."

In another minute, therefore, Sam and Mary had linked an arm within each other's, had spun round twice—the Scamp always spins twice to everybody else's once!—and then had separated,—Mary to take the arm of the nearest gentleman and be solemnly turned by him,—Sam to do the same, with more vigour but less grace, with the boys who were doing duty as ladies.

Then the partners met again in the centre, Mary was once more twirled twice round by the unflagging Scamp, and again they parted, each to their respective sides.

This was repeated all adown the ranks, until all had duly twirled or been twirled, and then they linked arms once more for a final spin, all the way up the centre, back to their places again.

What a pace the Scamp whirled Mary round at!

The boys laughed and shouted, and even Mrs. Hughes cried, "Gently, Sam, gently!"

But the Scamp flew on, heedless and reckless. It was the last night, and his spirits, consequently, at their highest level.

When he finally left go of Mary's arm, the impetus sent her rushing off at a sharp angle, pell-mell towards the wall. But Sam only laughed at his awkwardness, and shouted to her to "Come on!" as he turned round and led the file of boys doubling backwards to the place where he and Mary were to form an arch with their joined hands, under which the couples must all pass to their fresh positions in the rows.

Willie Knowles and Miss Baxter came last, and pretended to find great difficulty in bending their tall heads low enough to creep through the low archway, thereby greatly offending the dignity of the Scamp, who proposed to Mary that they should treat Willie as he would be served in "Oranges and Lemons," where there comes

"A chopper to chop off the last man's head."

By-and-by I grew tired, and was ordered back to bed.

So the dancing came to a temporary standstill, and, one by one, the boys came to bid "Good-night" and "Good-bye" to me; for I should not see them before they set off homewards on the morrow.

As the Scamp pushed his way eagerly up to me, with his tangled hair flying all about his flushed face, I felt a rising sensation almost of dislike towards him. A feeling so strange and new, where the Scamp was concerned, that I could not help feeling ashamed of myself, at the same time, for harbouring

such treacherous thoughts against a dear old chum like him, even for a moment.

"Peace! peace!—this last night, at any rate!" whispered a still, small voice within my heart. "You surely would not part from an old friend, with a feeling of resentment against him in your heart,—when you have spent a whole half together and have never known an unkind word or look from him all the time, would you?"

Well, if I felt any lurking bitterness against a fellow, it would not be possible to preserve it long, when that fellow was the rollicking, good-natured Scamp.

Here he was before me, his hand outstretched, and such a jolly, kindly smile beaming on his scarlet cheeks, as he cried, with a good-humoured laugh, in the same old joking strain,—

"Good-bye, young 'un. And when we meet again next half, I hope you will give yourself rather more *airs* than you seem to have just now, and that is not a thing I would say to most fellows. Hope the holiday *airs* will set you on your feet again pretty quick, Master Ayres! Good-bye, good-bye."

"Good-bye. And I hope *you* will come back *less* of a *Scamp* than you are now," I retaliated, emphasizing my words every here and there with an expressive nod, as I did my best to return the pressure of his farewell grasp by squashing his hard hand tightly in both of mine.

Harry Morland and Mat Davis edged their way up to me next, and the latter, in the excess of his warmth at parting from me for so long, kissed me affectionately on both my cheeks, which made the other boys laugh, though every one was in far too good a humour with themselves, and everything around them, to utter any contemptuous remarks.

Then, the leave-taking over, I was "extinguished"—as Willie Knowles said—by the thick folds of the big shawl, and slowly but surely the return journey to my own room was accomplished in safety.

It was not surprising that the excitement of the last half-hour

should have proved a greater strain upon my nerves than I could bear without suffering for it afterwards, whilst I was still so weak ; nor that, as a natural consequence, my brain should be in such a state of activity as to banish sleep from my weary eyelids, for a long while after I was snugly ensconced in bed.

So, wakeful and restless, I tossed to and fro, this way and that, upon my pillow.

By-and-by my mental irritation found a partial relief, as I exclaimed, in a curious mixture of dismay and triumph,—

“There now!—it is just as I said : the half is over, and I am not a peacemaker at all :—not the least little bit.”

“Hush ! hush ! Bernie. Did I not tell you that perhaps you might become one, after all, in a different—and possibly a higher—sense than ever you expected ? Perhaps this very night, who can tell ?” added Mrs. Hughes, mysteriously.

Then she continued, “But you must try and go to sleep, now, and wake up with all these morbid fancies clean gone out of your brain. You will never get strong and well again, if you keep on worrying yourself so incessantly—and more than you were ever intended to—about such matters as these.

So it came to pass that, in less than half an hour, in spite of all my harassing doubts and perplexities, I had sunk into a deep, peaceful slumber.

And the waking thoughts still working busily in my brain, it was no great marvel that they should be woven into the same beautiful dream which had made so vivid an impression upon my mind and heart, as I lay basking in the summer sunshine, upon that memorable Sunday, months ago.

But this time the angel-guide no longer regarded me with sad, pitying eyes, sorrowing to think that I could not join those happy bands of little ones upon the silvery strand which edged the margin of that lovely lake : nor glide over its placid waters with the groups of children who sat, radiant and smiling, upon the flower-covered decks of their golden gondolas, singing sweet songs as they sailed noiselessly along. For, instead of

sorrow or mourning upon her down-turned face, her gentle countenance seemed all aglow with triumphant gladness and delight, as she stooped low to whisper softly in my ear those magic words which formed the burthen of the sweet refrain to the children's praiseful anthem.

With a sudden, shuddering start I awoke,—and there, one on either side of my narrow bed, their hands joined lovingly across my prostrate body, knelt two familiar forms, in one of whom I recognized my father!

At the same moment, I felt a loving arm steal gently round my neck, and in my ear I heard a sweet, low, woman's voice murmuring the very words that had awaked me from my wondrous dream,—

“Peacemaker at last, Bernard! Peacemaker at last!

“*‘Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called the children of God.’*”

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